

THE LEATHER MAN

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THE
LEATHER MAN

LAWRENCE TREAT



RICH AND COWAN

London New York Melbourne Sydney Cape Town

*To the Putnams,
Connie and Wallie*

NOTE

All the characters in this book are imaginary, with the exception of the Leather Man, whose authenticity has been ably documented by Allison Albee in the Bulletin of the Westchester County Historical Society.

CHAPTER ONE

It was dark and he could hardly remember when he hadn't been struggling up the embankment. Clawing. Scraping. Digging his fingers into raw, wet earth. Grabbing thin, spindly stalks that cut into his hands and then broke off.

He could hear the blare of a radio and the steady, swishing sound of running water. The water meant danger. He mustn't slide back into it. Water—danger—death.

He didn't know how he'd got this far up the embankment. He must have acted automatically, without awareness, after he'd been struck. But now he was aware.

It was worse this way. Darkness, tufts of grass that pulled loose like dead hair. Thorns that ripped the skin from his palms. Urgency. And the sense of danger.

The danger hovered over him, ready to pounce, and he lay there helplessly. All the pain in the world was in his head. He fought it. He had to climb. Up. He had to get away from the house, across the ravine and as far as he could crawl. Then he could rest.

His fingers scraped the rough bark of a tree, but the trunk was too big around and there was nothing to hold. He wriggled in a blind, terrified frenzy, and when he reached out again the tree was no longer there.

He couldn't understand it and panic began to take possession of him. That was even worse than the throbbing muddle of his brain. He let his head drop forward, but he couldn't rest. If he rested, he'd fall asleep and he might never wake again. He raised his aching head, and now he saw the tree. It was a little to his left. He rolled over to it, winding his body around its bulk. That made a difference. It was something solid and permanent.

He began crawling again. He wiped his face and it was wet with blood. Maybe just from his hands where the thorns had scratched. Maybe from the blow.

He heard the motor of the car and he saw the reflection of the headlights in the trees, and then the car rushed past and he was alone again. He'd never been so alone in all his life.

He wedged his feet against the tree and pushed. His hands grabbed a smooth, firm stalk, and it was the most beautiful thing he had ever touched. He wanted to keep it and hang on to it and take it with him, because it meant safety. He used it to pull himself up and then he reached forward and he was at the top.

He lay flat and looked at a black mass and a pattern of square lights, and by and by it dawned on him that it was a house and that it was where he'd come from. People were there and one of them had tried to kill him. It had happened so quickly and so unexpectedly that he didn't remember. Later on it would be clear, but now he didn't know who it was. He didn't even know who he was.

He saw the wooden bridge and he struggled to his feet. He started to fall, and he found that moving his feet kept him going and maintained his balance. That was how he stumbled across the wooden footbridge, bumping against the railing and then staggering and watching his feet move and telling himself he couldn't fall as long as he kept his legs going. Then he was in the woods and a root tripped him and he sprawled headlong.

He fell on soft earth and the smell of it was heady and momentarily cleared his brain. He recalled part of it then. The part which above all else he wanted to forget. The dark, horrible impulse. The ugly need to kill. He had had it.

But he wouldn't have carried it out. He wasn't that kind. Dear God, I never would have. It was just something that went through my head. I didn't mean it. Oh God, forgive me. Forgive ...

He woke up after a while and his head bothered him. He'd drunk a lot of liquor, but he wasn't drunk. He had to find the bridge again. Once he saw the bridge he'd be near the house. People were there. Somebody would help.

He rose to his knees and began crawling. He didn't care how he got there. Crawling or rolling or dragging himself on his belly. But he had to make it. Somewhere was a road and a bridge and a stream, and if he located any one of them, he'd find his way.

Suddenly he saw the bridge, but it was narrower than before, and instead of a pair of railings an irregular line of boards marked one side. It wasn't the same bridge, but that didn't matter.

He wriggled towards it and groped for one of the timbers. It

was solid and he tried to haul himself up, but it wasn't worth the effort. He could crawl. He'd crawl for the rest of his life, if only they'd let him live.

His knees scraped on rock and it was wet and sticky, and then he tumbled. Not down, but just in. It was heavy and wet and there was no bottom. He couldn't move his legs. The stuff was sucking in his whole body. It was too much for him. The pull, the heaviness was suffocating his limbs. He let out a mighty yell, but the sound caught in his windpipe and came out in a futile bleating.

He tried to kick, but the weight on his legs was overpowering. His body was sliding in deeper, deeper, and he tried to jerk upward. The wrench loosened his feeble grip on the timber and he pin-wheeled his arms in an attempt to fling himself towards the plank. Instead, he slid away. One elbow caught in the heavy, horrible, sticky stuff and pinned down his whole arm. Then panic hit him.

He yelled again, and the sound was even weaker than before. He knew he was going crazy because he heard music. Loud and confident, it seemed to float across from the house and to approach him unerringly. But the strange, eerie thing was the melody. He was listening to a Wedding March.

Then, at last, he knew that she had betrayed him. He saw it all in a single, blinding, horrible gleam. He saw her, tall and slender and smiling and false, with that strange glint in her eyes. He used to call it her come-on-look, and she'd laugh and tell him not to be vulgar. But she knew. She always knew what she was doing, and she'd done it deliberately. And now she was getting married. Her marriage, and his.

For that solitary instant his head no longer hurt. He was too full of feeling. All the feeling and passion in the world seemed to centre on him and transfix him.

Then it was over. The heavy, crushing liquid drew him down and closed slowly over his descending head. The last thing anyone could have seen were the two hands, upstretched and groping.

There were no bubbles.

CHAPTER TWO

LEATHER MAN ROAD runs north from the highway. Though no signpost marks it, you will recognize it easily enough. The poison ivy is a little thicker, the stone walls a little older, the mail-boxes a little farther apart and the names on them a bit more dignified. Wood Hill, Pleasant Acres, Roaring Rock, The Brook. And, after Frank Danzig moved in, Damp House.

Frank, driving through the twisting valley that first day he saw it, was impressed. It seemed so remote and secluded, and yet completely amiable. The hills were wild and wooded with great boulders at their crests, and the open slopes were overgrown with tall, brownish-golden grass that rippled as if it were alive.

He sniffed happily at the poison ivy and said: "This is nice. Myrtle growing all along the road. Or is it laurel? I never did get my botany straight."

"It's poison ivy," declared his sister.

Frank laughed it off. "They wouldn't do that to me. Hell—I'm going to live here!"

"Don't let it bother you," she said. "You'll be immune."

He shrugged and wondered vaguely what would happen on this narrow, winding road if a car ever came from the opposite direction. Catastrophe, he assumed serenely, and he turned his attention to the mail-boxes.

He saw them all, and even the names sounded friendly to him. Blithe, Kerrigan, Rapier, Sir. Danzig belonged there, too, living in one of those quiet old houses screened from the road by thick trees. And the stuff on the roadside wasn't poison ivy, even if his sister said so.

He told her why. "God wouldn't pollute a nice place like this. I wonder what the house is like."

"It can't be much. Everybody tries to put something over on you, just as soon as they find out you're a school-teacher."

Frank whistled happily. He'd inherited the place by way of a real estate deal. Yesterday he'd called his sister and said, "Look—some guy defaulted on a mortgage and offered me a country estate."

"Did you take it?"

"Sure. I couldn't foreclose and turn him out, could I? He's got a wife and two and a half children."

"What's half a child?"

"Due in October. Hell—you know the facts of life without making me explain over a telephone. It's up in the wilds of Westchester and the address is Leather Man Road and it's mine. Site unseen. What do you suppose a Leather Man is?"

"Probably there used to be a tannery in the vicinity."

"You're too prosaic. I figure some guy with skin like a crocodile's retired from the circus and settled there in his old age."

"When do you want to go?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, of course. Think I can wait?"

The house almost dampened his spirits. It was a grey, sunless structure cemented into the side of a ravine. The top floor was flush with the road, but the rest of the building descended in steps to the floor of the small canyon. A stream cascaded over an immense rock and then shot into the ravine. As Frank remarked, the house had been built upside down. You entered the basement and then went downstairs till you emerged into a big raftered room, a few feet above the level of the black, swirling waters.

He surveyed the place with his usual cheerful expression. He was tall and spacious and healthy. His outgrowing ears, one a trifle higher than the other so that he looked a little lopsided and not to be taken quite seriously, gave him an air of always laughing at himself. But, as he reached the big, draughty room at the lowest level and stared at the water, his mouth curved wryly and his clear, blue eyes became thoughtful.

"The guy responsible for this," he murmured, "hated himself. I hate him, too. Sis, you can have it."

"I don't want it if you don't," she said sweetly.

Frank shrugged. "If I had a family, like you, I'd grab it for the sake of the children. Moving in?"

"Well, maybe for the summer."

That was five years ago. In the interval his sister had migrated to California and Frank had become principal of a private school for boys. And he had stayed in his house. The reason was Lola Blithe.

All that July day, Frank concentrated on not thinking about her. She was getting married tonight and he'd been married a few months ago. So what? So he was building a dam.

He worked with the masons who were pouring concrete. The dam was twenty feet high and would both make Frank a swimming pool and relieve the pressure on the foundations of the house. The millrace, with its savage, black current would be nothing but a memory. Like his affair with Lola.

That bothered him. There was no reason why the two things should be hooked up in his mind. The whole business annoyed him and lashed him into a furious need to work, and he took it out on the three Italians who were just good-natured dummies earning a day's wages. And who were neither going to swim in the pool nor watch Lola get married.

Nevertheless, Frank couldn't help himself. He'd start a train of thought and then he'd cut himself off and force himself into a spurt of activity. He'd trundle another load of mixed concrete and splash it down into the dam, between the boulders and the wooden forms. He'd empty the wheelbarrow with a clatter, swing around and yowl good-naturedly.

"What's the matter with you guys? Can't you keep up the pace? And me only an amateur, and an army reject at that!"

Tony, who was the chief mason, looked up and wiped the perspiration out of his eyes. "Meester Danzig, theesa army, she no turn you down becausa you no got the beeg, strong shoulders, no?"

Frank swung off with another load and shouted: "Come on, Tony—you're stalling! I have to finish this thing tonight and go to a wedding."

"The wedding, she come along pretty good without you. Alla they want, she'sa the bride and the groom. Who the hell are you, heh?"

"Me? I'm the guy that's giving the wedding. I got them the preacher, and I'm giving away the bride and the wedding cake and a whole case of Scotch. Still think I'm not important? Tony, I'm the whole damn' cheese!"

Tony pushed back his stiff straw hat and laughed, showing the black stumps of his teeth. "You talka beeg, but the bride, she'sa,

not worry her head over you. The only thinga that matter is this— who'sa sleep with the bride tonight, heh?"

Frank didn't laugh. He said, "Come on—fill this up and let's get some work done." And he went at it with a steady fury that drove all thought out of his head. And maybe that was his real reason for building a dam.

Twice Tony warned him to put a hat on. "Meester Danzig, theesa sun, she'sa too much for you. She'sa too much for any man without he have a skull thicka like Mussolin." And he threw back his head and erupted a stream of hard, healthy laughter.

The warning only made Frank more obstinate. "I was born in the tropics, Tony. Boiled my brains out before I was two, and no northern sun can bother me."

"If the Lord, He give me brains like you, then poor Tony sit home and take heem easy on a day like this."

"Damned if you would," retorted Frank. "You'd pour red wine down your throat till you heated up like a furnace."

Tony nodded. "Fine-a swell idea, that." He put his hand in the grey, vicious stuff that flowed out of the concrete mixer, and made a slight adjustment. The stuff was coming out like soup.

It was that way all the afternoon. The masons jabbering away and dripping with sweat and periodically slogging over to the water pail for a drink, and then exchanging a few words with Frank and going back to the job. He had that effect on people, of imbuing them with good nature and the desire to pitch in. It was in his face, it was something he gave out.

Frank quit around five, when the first section of the dam was finished. There was still plenty of pouring to do, but Tony said he'd be at it until almost dark, and Frank realized he was getting over tired. He watched the masons move their equipment to a more convenient point. Then he squatted at the edge of the dam and wrote his wife's name in concrete. Alice. For the rest of his life he could walk over here and read her name and feel good.

He stood up and wiped his forehead. The faint breeze chilled him. The wedding wasn't scheduled until ten o'clock, but he wished it was over and done with.

Except that the wedding was merely a beginning. It would

mean Lola next door and Lola married to his best friend. Frank didn't want to think about that.

He saw the wheelbarrow and the extra bags of cement and he had an urge to do a little more work. Just one more job. Blank out his mind. Pile one-hundred-pound bags of cement and lug them up to the corn patch. He wanted to build a foundation up there for a tool house.

He picked up a bag and had to exert all his strength to raise it. It slipped from his hands and thudded to the ground. Swearing at himself, he swung it up again and dropped it heavily in the barrow. He tottered from the effort and, for a moment, he thought he was going to faint. He shivered again. Maybe Tony had been right, at that. Maybe he'd had too much sun.

But that was nonsense. He'd worked harder on hotter days, and the only effect had been on his appetite. Still, if he felt this way, he ought to haul the cement in the station wagon. There wasn't much of a road, but he supposed he could get through.

He circled the ravine, clumped across the rustic footbridge overlooking the waterfall and entered the garage. He was backing into the driveway when Red Kerrigan yelled at him.

Frank stopped the car. "Hello, Red," he said. "Hop in and help me lug some cement."

"On my wedding day?"

"Sure. I just want you to help lift some of the heavy stuff."

"Not in my white suit, I don't."

"Get in and shut up," said Frank affably.

The running-board creaked with Red's weight as he climbed in. But he was subdued and his usual bluster was absent.

"What I want," he said, "is to get hold of the guy that said the first time is always the hardest."

"Your statistical base isn't broad enough," remarked Frank. "You can't generalize on just two tries. Here's the cement."

"Well, go ahead and load. I'll watch."

"I strained a muscle before," said Frank. "That's why I need you."

"Oh," said Red. "Sure." He sighed, took off his jacket and folded it neatly across the seat. Then he stepped out and tossed the

bags into the station wagon as easily as if they were the day's order of groceries. He climbed back into the car.

Frank drove slowly along the bumpy ruts. Red, his mind still on the wedding, didn't even wisecrack.

"This one's going to stick," he said suddenly. "Look, Frank—I wanted to talk to you." He licked his lips and went on haltingly. "We're friends, Frank. Practically related."

"Brothers-in-law," murmured Frank. "After all, Alice's your half-sister, isn't she? Or did you forget?"

"Damned if I know what that makes us. Anyway, we're neighbours and so on, and I'd hate to see anything come between us."

Frank stopped the car at the end of the trail. The field beyond was marked with the green shoots of new corn. It was a big field and he and Red had planted it together, on a Sunday. Alice had walked over with a thermos bottle of iced tea and a portable radio. Frank and Red had sowed corn to the strains of a Beethoven concerto and Alice had sat at the edge of the field and watched. Frank thought that no man had ever been happier than he, on that day.

"What's wrong, Red?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing. But—well, you and Lola. I was wondering whether anything's left of the old feeling."

Frank shook his head. "No, because it's been on my mind, too. In fact, I've asked myself the same question a lot of times, but the answer's always the same. I love Alice. Period."

Red's frown didn't leave him. "I know that. But we'll be seeing each other every day, the four of us, and—you were pretty fond of her."

"I'd be a liar if I said we didn't have the makings of trouble. If it doesn't come, so much the better. In case it does—well, I'll put a bottle aside and write your name on it. Any time you want to talk about this, just take the bottle out. I'll know, and we won't pull punches."

Red produced a packet of cigarettes, handed one to Frank and then lit up. Red puffed thoughtfully and Frank put his hand on Red's shoulder.

"I'll tell you your real trouble, Red. It's Kathy."

"You're cock-eyed."

"No, I'm not. I've watched this thing from the beginning. Kathy was a damn' good wife, and everybody around here liked her and still does."

"I like her myself."

Frank frowned. He knew this was none of his business, but he couldn't help butting in. Not just to get something off his chest, but because of the slim, remote chance that he could get through to Red and show up Red's mistake.

Frank put out his cigarette. "That isn't what I mean, Red. You should have stuck to Kathy and you know it. She'll be on your conscience the rest of your life. If I could do it, I'd take you over on my knee and spank the hell out of you until you promised to change brides. You've got about four hours left, Red. Think. And think hard."

"I suppose that's what everybody's saying," remarked Red. "They feel I should have stuck to Kathy, that she's too good for me, and that Lola's just a——" He broke off. "Nuts!" he exclaimed angrily.

"Think," repeated Frank.

Red laughed sharply. "What the hell do they know about it? I'll tell you something, Frank. You didn't know me when I got married. Kathy and I travelled around in the same crowd. She was a good kid. We paired off, had fun together. I kissed her once or twice, but that was all.

"It might have gone on that way, except that everyone else in the crowd got married. It just so happened. And around that time, Sergeant moved to Washington and took Alice along with him. For the first time in my life, I had no family and no home. I knew Kathy was in love with me. I liked her and I wanted to get married, but I hadn't fallen in love. I figured maybe I never would, that I wasn't the type or something. And here was Kathy going out with nobody except me. It imposed a kind of obligation.

"I'm not claiming I made a sacrifice. We had fun together, we got along well and I sort of drifted into it. I wanted it, sure. But not because Kathy stirred me deep down. She was pleasant and companionable, and a particularly swell egg.

"The night before we got married, she returned my ring. Said she knew I wasn't in love with her and she didn't want to rope me

in. She told me I could have my freedom back. I refused, of course, and she said okay, but on one condition. That if I ever fell in love, the real thing, I must tell her. She wanted me to be happy, and as for herself, the one thing she couldn't stand was pity. She said she'd know. And she did. Just like that. So—am I guilty?"

"We're all guilty, and there's no such thing as justification."

"That isn't what I mean, Frank. I mean in your eyes. Do you still think I'm playing a dirty trick on Kathy?"

Frank's eyes clouded and he put his hand on Red's shoulder. "Yes," said Frank sombrely. "On Kathy and on yourself. Dirty as hell."

Red stared stonily at the windshield. For about a minute neither of them spoke. Frank knew he'd hit below the belt and that for a time their friendship would be strained. But it was a good friendship and it could stand stress. Whatever else, Frank gave people honesty and he told the truth as he saw it.

Red slapped savagely at a mosquito. "Missed," he said tonelessly.

Frank grunted. His head was beginning to ache. "Forget it, Red. Unload my cement and forget about Lola and me. You don't have to worry."

Red poked his fist playfully at Frank's chin and then climbed out of the car. "Sure, Boss. Where the hell do you want the cement?"

"Just pile it on those rocks, under the maple."

Frank watched Red's soft, lazy movements as he toted the heavy bags. Red, worrying about Lola. The real trouble was that Red wasn't sure of her. But then, who could be?

Frank sighed and leaned back. Red piled the last bag and returned for his jacket. He slung it over his arm and then brushed at the dark, sweaty patch on his trousers. The stain didn't come off.

"I have another pair," he said. "I got dressed too soon, anyhow. When do you expect Sergeant?"

"Who knows?" smiled Frank. "He'll just arrive. In a jeep or an army bomber or a toy balloon. But he'll get here."

"Don't send him up to my place too soon, will you? I feel like a touch of solitude."

"To think?" asked Frank.

"I don't know. You knocked me on my ear and I want to get

my balance back. I think I'll take the short cut over the hill. See you at the wedding."

"Right."

Red's big bearlike shape wallowed through the tall grass and disappeared over the slight rise of ground. Glumly, Frank wondered whether he should have spoken. It could do no good, of course. For, even if a miracle were wrought and Red changed his mind, Lola would swing him right back again. Whatever else, Lola got what she went after.

That was a disquieting thought, and Frank didn't pursue it. He knew Lola as did no one else in the world, and he was certain she wasn't in love with Red. Then why marry him? Because he had money and a nice house and was easy to handle? Possibly. Or because he lived next door to Frank?

Suddenly, Frank hated her. He saw her in the months and years ahead, dropping in unexpectedly to show off a new dress, smiling and talking in whimsical bursts that would bury the single sharp, venomous phrase that she had come to utter. You didn't always feel her remarks when they went in, but they sank deep. She'd never be happy with Red. And to counteract her unhappiness, she'd work on Alice, picking her apart, prying her from Frank. Always. Frank knew that.

There was a pulsing in his forehead. His jaw felt slack and his whole face seemed dry and burning. He wanted to cry out that he wouldn't have it, that he'd prevent the wedding and show Red the mistake he was making. He'd stand up in the middle of the ceremony and howl. When you wanted a thing badly enough, you accomplished it. There were ways.

He stepped on the starter and raced the motor until the yammer of it rattled every bolt in the car. The shattering sound did him good. He eased up on the throttle, turned the car round, and went bumping back across the fields.

There were ways. There had to be.

CHAPTER THREE

THE sombreness of Damp House was on the lower floors where you stared perpetually at the dark, rushing waters and at the shady bank of the ravine. A couple of giant pines sprouted precariously from the carpet of moss and moist rocks and towered up to challenge the height of the house.

But on the side from which you approached the house there was no sombreness and no height. All you saw was the top storey of a grey shingle house with a dark green roof and a profusion of casement windows. Beyond, the forest loomed protectively, but the foreground had been cleared and planted with grass. Frank wondered how many times he'd mowed that lawn and moved the same tables and deck-chairs, cutting not quite close enough to the long fringes of flower-beds and the clumps of rhododendron. He'd landscaped the place himself. The impression was pleasant but not quite right, and he never drove in without asking himself where he'd made his mistake.

Frank parked the station wagon in the garage and stepped outside. The dining-room and kitchen were on this level and he went in through the kitchen door. He felt as if he'd interrupted a classroom in domestic science.

A half dozen girls in their lower teens were chattering excitedly while they buttered sandwiches and did things to trays and dishes and pots. The girls came from the near-by settlement camp, where Alice worked four days a week, and she'd drafted a contingent to help cater the wedding.

They called out "Hello, Mr. Danzig," and he grinned and said: "Hello, girls. What's cooking?"

They giggled and one of them answered. "All sorts of things. I think weddings are wonderful."

Then Alice, carrying a tray-load of glasses, came through the doorway and nothing else existed.

She was tall, slim, long-limbed, with a clean, fresh grace. She had coal-black hair and the darkest eyes he had ever seen in a woman. Dark, amused eyes, cool and deep and quiet.

Frank said, "Hello, honey," and Alice smiled softly.

"Hello," she said. She put down the tray and studied him. "Frank, are you feeling all right?"

A wave of dizziness swept him. He had to grit his teeth and concentrate on not swaying. Then the dizziness passed off and he spoke, casually. "Sure. Fine."

She hooked her arm in his and led him into the dining-room. "The masons are still out there. Were you working with them all this time?"

"No. I was with Red, up in back. We moved some cement."

"Father's here."

"Since when?"

"A half hour ago. He simply arrived in a taxi, said he was hot and that he wanted to shower and then go over to Red's." Her dark eyes were murky and her tenseness almost crackled. "Frank, you look flushed. There's something the matter."

"Nonsense," he said. "I'm fine, and if I weren't so sweaty, I'd kiss you and prove it."

"Kiss me anyhow."

He grinned, conscious of her tautness and wondering why he held himself back. "I'd stain," he said. "I'd smudge worse than chocolate. Guess I'd better shower."

He started to leave, but the sharpness of her tone swung him around.

"Frank!" she exclaimed.

"Yes?"

"I don't know. Everything seems so peculiar. Weddings should be fun, and this one isn't. Lola all alone. None of her family here. Do you realize that not a single person coming is her friend? They're all Red's!"

"They're hers, too, aren't they?"

Alice shook her head. "No, that's just it. They know her, but they're not her friends. They're Red's. And Kathy's."

"Maybe we ought to get them drunk early," said Frank. "A round or so before the ceremony."

"When I go in there with the girls," said Alice, "it's like a different world. They're excited, the way people should be. They

chatter and laugh about nothing. Then I leave them and I shiver. Frank, I'm not the hysterical type, am I?"

"Hardly."

"I don't know what's come over me. I haven't seen Kathy in hours. She's always just left the room I go in. I hear her in the bathroom or see the cushion where she's been sitting or I find her cigarette still burning, but she isn't there. It's all so—I don't know. Red's first wife here to see him get married. The wedding at ten o'clock to make sure that Lola's brother is off to work and can't attend. Why won't she have him? They live in the same house, they're fond of each other, aren't they?"

"Lola has whims."

"She just thought up a new one. She wants to dress in the game-room and she wants to be alone. She called up about it. She wants a vanity table put in there for her. I just brought it down. She was going to dress upstairs and then come down and wait in the game-room, but she's changed her mind. Why? Why, Frank, why?"

"Ask her, Monkey."

"I did. She said the spiral stairs were so narrow that she'd never manage it in her wedding dress."

"Sounds logical."

"Yes. But she isn't wearing a wedding dress. She's wearing a suit, and Kathy made it for her and she doesn't want to see Kathy."

Frank frowned and felt troubled. Then the 'phone began ringing. He said, "I'll take it," and he went out to the hall. For no reason he was aware of, he closed the door behind him. Then he answered the 'phone.

"Mr. Danzig?" said the voice. "This is Mr. Henry Hamilton."

"Yes?" said Frank. It was the minister who was to perform the ceremony. Frank had canvassed all the local ministers and come up against a tacit conspiracy. A newly divorced groom and the notorious Lola Blithe. The ministers were sorry. They had excuses. They all had the same answer. No. Except Hamilton.

"Mr. Danzig, I've been thinking over the matter of the wedding. I've even discussed it with some of my colleagues, and I'm afraid,

under the circumstances, that my conscience won't permit me to officiate."

Frank said "What?" in a shrill tone. "What? Are you serious? A couple of hours before the wedding, and you want to back out now?"

"I just explained that it's a question of conscience."

"It's a question of human decency, and consideration for the people here."

"But——"

Frank interrupted angrily. "As far as I know, the law gives you the authority to marry people, and doesn't mention the right of deciding who can get married and who can't."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Danzig, but I'm a minister and not in the civil service. My decision is irrevocable." The 'phone clicked and the wire went dead.

Frank stared at the wall. He didn't want Red to get married and neither did anyone else. Here was a beautiful out.

He sketched a bag of cement on the telephone pad. If he announced what had happened, everybody would be upset and Lola and Red would take their marriage licence to town and get married at the Municipal Building tomorrow morning.

Frank didn't like the idea. When you get married, the least you're entitled to is a smooth ceremony and a peaceful launching. And Red was his best friend and Frank had taken charge of everything, and he wasn't going to let a hick minister with a microscopic mind gum the works at this point. Still—how?

He drew another bag of cement and thought of the local justices of the peace. With one exception, they wouldn't go with the flowers and music and cocktails. And the one exception was away.

Frank laughed suddenly and thought of his assistant principal. Harry Wheeler Marlowe taught history and was as imposing as his name. Big and bluff, with prematurely white hair and a Westerner's deep, steady voice, he looked deceptively simple and frank. But Frank had appointed him for two reasons. He was unorthodox and he had a sense of humour.

Frank called the number and outlined the situation tersely. "So I'm in a hell of a jam," he finished. "Now look. Put on your

most imposing rig, grab the next train and take a taxi from the station. I'm introducing you as the Reverend Marlowe and I'll have a copy of the proper ceremony for you. All you do is read it off. Afterwards we'll explain to the bride and groom, and they can get married quietly tomorrow. Okay?"

"What kind of a crime do you figure this is?"

"A minor one. But whatever it is, I'll take the responsibility. Nobody knows who you are and nobody's going to. Okay?"

"You're a fool, Frank, but so am I. And you can be glad of it."

Frank breathed a deep sigh and hung up.

He went downstairs slowly. A marriage that nobody wanted except the bride, and her motives were unknown. And certainly not based on love. Well, it would be a mock wedding, for fair.

Frank realized he was playing with fire. Maybe the sun had affected his common sense. His brain felt fuzzy and slow, but at least he'd conquered the immediate obstacle. And he was excited at the prospect of the hoax and felt better for the first time since he'd left the masons.

He heard sounds in the guest-room and he walked in without knocking. A little, gnome-like man with a high, bald forehead and bright inquisitive eyes jumped up and effervesced with questions. He was in his underwear and he had two ties in his hands and he kept holding first one and then the other next to his suit, to see which colour matched better.

"Hello, Frank—where were you? I can't find anybody. Never in all my life saw a house so upset. Alice and a troupe of teen-age pixies brewing potions in the kitchen. You off in the woods. I haven't seen Red and I haven't seen Kathy and I'm damned if I can remember the bride's name. Who is she? What's she called?"

Frank sat down on the bed. "Lola. Now look, Sergeant. Life is complicated and—"

"Don't tell me how complicated life is. I know. I just came from Washington and it's a madhouse. I don't want to step from one madhouse into another. I want to relax and meet Red's new wife and—what the devil's her name? I've never even seen her. You're level-headed, Frank. Is this what he really wants? I always thought Kathy was good for him. How is she taking it?"

"If this isn't what Red wants, he went to a hell of a lot of trouble to fool himself."

"People always fool themselves. Red, in particular. But I don't see why Kathy has to suffer."

"She isn't suffering. She practically arranged the wedding and she's the bride's best friend. Red sent her flowers. The whole thing's nice and civilized. And between you and me, Sergeant, it's all wrong."

"Then why let it go through? Nobody has to suffer in this world. We're here to be happy and we manufacture our own troubles. If it weren't for Alice and Red, I'd be happy myself."

"What did Alice do?"

"She married you, didn't she?"

"Sure. Best guy in the world. Scotch blood in me."

"What's the Scotch blood got to do with it? You're not stingy."

"I hope not. But the Scotch have a toast and they use it with every drink. 'May the Lord give us a good opinion of ourselves!'"

"Well, I'm your father-in-law and I don't have to have a good opinion of you. Besides, I came for a wedding and I'm not interested in you. I want to see Red and Kathy and their bride. Where is she?"

"I don't know. I don't even care. I'm sick."

"How can Alice be happy if she's married to a sick man?"

"I'm not sick. I'm just dying. I only have a couple of hours to get my health back and I want you to front for me. Say I'm still in the shower or got caught in my braces or something."

Sergeant Penscott crossed the room and put his hand on Frank's shoulder. "What's the matter, my boy? Really sick? Or just crazy?"

"I got too much sun and I want to lie down for a while. Now take your shower and put on your trousers and then you can 'phone Red."

"I took my shower long ago, and——" he looked down at his underdrawers. "By God, I did forget my trousers!"

"Who in hell ever gave you a name like Sergeant?"

The little man burst out laughing. "Two Methodists that got married and had me for a son. And ever since I've been in Washington, I'm going crazy. People get me mixed up and think it's a rank and they never want to see anybody less than a colonel. Frank, you're not really sick, are you?"

"Nothing that rest won't fix up."

"I'm no good at these things, but if you want anything, I'll get it."

"No, thanks."

Sergeant tapped his shoulder. "You're better than when you came in, aren't you? All you need is to forget yourself. You know, my boy, I really shouldn't have come to the damn' wedding. I don't like them. They're obscene. What's this Lola like?"

Frank got up. "Let me rest, Sergeant. You're very trying."

"I wear out everybody except myself." He finished putting on his trousers. "You're resting and Red's probably all upset. You should have seen him when he married Kathy. Practically had to be carried to the altar. I hope he does better this time. Who's marrying them?"

"I don't know. Will you do it?"

"Haven't the legal power, or I'd be glad to. Don't joke, Frank. Who's marrying them? That's supposed to be important, though I never understood why."

"I had a little trouble getting someone. All the local ministers refused because of the divorce."

The little gnome nodded wisely. "Sure. Twisted minds caught between a biblical idea and an economic system. They substitute prejudices for love and understanding. Bah! So whom did you get? A bricklayer?"

"A man from Yonkers. Someone recommended him and I spoke to him over the 'phone. He sounded all right."

"Probably needs the money. Did you tell him to have his pants pressed? He'll be standing there in front of everybody and you should have asked him for a photograph. What time is he coming?"

"Probably on the nine-forty. I'm going to rest a while. Don't tell anybody I feel punk, will you?"

Sergeant was half-way out of the room and he called over his shoulder. "Sure. I'll look in on you. Don't worry, Frank." His voice trailed off and then Frank heard it again, pitched higher and calling as if from a great distance. "Hello, Alice? Are you up or down? I never know, in this damn' house."

Frank stood up slowly. When he reached the corridor, no one

was in sight. Instead of crossing the hall to his room, he went downstairs. He stopped in front of a door that opened on to a platform between the second and third floors.

Then he remembered that the door was locked. It was always locked, but it was time to open it. As if performing a rite, he raised his fist and pounded. Then he turned the knob.

To his surprise, the door swung open.

CHAPTER FOUR

FRANK stepped inside. The Venetian blinds were not quite closed and the semi-circular bank of french windows was bathed in a queer, soft luminosity. The room was furnished as a study and the furniture bulked dark and unreal. He gazed at it piece by piece. Chairs, end tables, ash-trays. The empty filing cabinet. The massive, built-in desk that had never been used, the bed that had never been slept in, the books that had never been opened. Then, as his eye traced the outlines, the objects seemed to disintegrate and slide off into nothingness.

Frank crossed the room slowly and wondered who had unlocked the door. He supposed he'd done it himself. But whether he had or had not, someone else had closed the blinds.

Alice, of course. Then she knew. Perhaps that was why she had been so taut, a few minutes ago. Taut and expectant, but unwilling to bring up the subject. Frank recalled how, the first time she'd seen the house, she'd pointed to the door off the middle of the stairway and asked him what it was.

"Just a room I don't use," he'd answered. He'd been afraid he'd offend her by showing it, for the room told its story too eloquently, insinuating the untruth that nothing had been tampered with because Lola herself was still sacred. But the plain fact was that Frank had been lazy and had merely closed off the room until the day he would find another use for it.

He'd told Alice about his affair with Lola, of course, but in the telling he'd forgotten about the room. And in the ensuing weeks, whenever he'd thought of it, the whole business had struck him as silly and not worth mentioning.

He raised the blinds and stood there, rubbing his forehead. With the last light of evening the room seemed to blaze and glow in all its fantastic purples, from the delicate mauve of the walls, through the lavender stain of the desk and the violet of chairs and rug to the bright, screaming stripes of the bedspread. Frank felt as if the colour were being branded into his brain. By and by it

dawned on him that colour had nothing to do with it and that he ought to drink plenty of water because he'd had a sunstroke.

He walked into the bathroom and turned on the tap. There was a rattling sound and the water came rusty. He let it run until it was clear, and then he filled a glass and drank.

When he came out of the bathroom someone was standing in the open doorway to the stairs. She was in shadow, and the shadows idealized her so that she became a slender, impersonal blonde in a bright yellow dress.

"Hello, Kathy," he said.

"Hello, Frank. I followed you in."

She moved forward a few steps and the light caught her cheek. Now he could distinguish the thin, strained lines of her face, the dull, light eyes, the quivering flare of her nostrils.

"This was going to be Lola's room," he said abruptly. "Like it?"

"Well, it's unusual."

"She decorated it herself, when we thought we were going to be married. She wanted a place to work. You know, in all the time I knew her, she never showed me a line she'd written or even told me her pen name. Sometimes I've wondered whether the real secret of her writing wasn't a gigantic hoax."

"It's no hoax, Frank. She's published some very good things."

"I don't doubt it. She's such a strange creature, Kathy. Hard and selfish, and naïve and trusting. Which side of her do you think Red will bring out?"

"I don't know."

"Of course not. But I'm wishing so damn' hard that she'll make Red happy. Is she going to change him?"

"She was anxious for all of us to remain friends," said Kathy, in a low, sing-song voice. "She said she felt as if she'd broken up a home. She wanted to atone for it and so she went to Reno with me. I suppose that's naïve. I suppose that's the sort of thing you meant just now."

"I hadn't thought about it. People are saying it's typical of Lola to override convention and maintain a friendship with you. But it seems to me that all the overriding, the generosity and bigness and understanding—they come from you."

Kathy gave a queer, choking sound. Frank said: "I'm going to rip this room apart and turn it into a nursery. I always hated the sight of it. Purple! People do funny things, don't they?"

"Yes. Sometimes."

Frank walked over and kissed her on the forehead. "You look tired, Kathy. Why don't you stay here another couple of weeks? We have loads of room, and Sergeant's spending his vacation with us. That ought to be an attraction."

She uttered a sob and slipped out of the room. Frowning, Frank closed the door after her and lay down on the bed. It was tough on Kathy. Much tougher than he'd realized. Red's story of their marriage . . .

Frank flexed his fingers and felt the satiny stripes of the coverlet. He remembered the day Lola had bought it. She'd been wearing a high-necked blouse and he'd told her it was too severe and made her look like a school-teacher.

"I'd rather look like a school-teacher than a whore," she'd retorted.

"There are a couple of other choices, Lola."

"Not for me. What else do you think I could be, Frank?"

"The charming Mrs. Danzig. And whether you know it or not, that's where you're heading."

"Don't dream us into a Kerrigan relationship. Like Red and Kathy."

"What's wrong with them?"

"He handles her with an oil can and a piece of chamois."

For some reason Lola had always disliked Kathy. Why, then, had Lola suddenly become friendly? Pity? Or did she really feel guilty and wish to atone? The unconscious need to do penance, motivating all of us. The doctrine of original sin.

Frank got up from the bed. The room was in semi-darkness now, with the colours vague and lustreless. He went into the bathroom and poured himself another glass of water. He saw the ivory thermos, filled it and brought it back with him. Then he lay down again.

He felt the dryness and the hotness of his skin. Outside, he could hear the rush of the waterfall. There were no other noises, for Lola had had the room soundproofed.

He remembered the day he'd met her. The first summer, when he'd been living with his sister and her family, he'd been walking along the road and he'd stopped to look at the neat, white, box-like house completely surrounded by farmland. In the distance someone was harrowing with an orange coloured tractor. Then she'd come down the hill, a tall, willowy girl, all dressed up as if she'd just stepped out of a Fifth Avenue window.

She'd smiled at him and said: "You're Frank Danzig, aren't you? Everybody's talking about you."

"What do they say?"

"That you're a good catch. If I had a mother, she'd have brought me around to see if my type of glue would stick. But instead, I have a brother. He says I'm better at breaking marriages than making them."

Apparently she'd been prophetic. Frank had closed his house on Leather Man Road while she'd made her play for Red, but Frank had heard about it. Stephen Sir, the writer who lived just north of Frank, had mentioned it a couple of times when they'd had lunch in town.

"I wish you'd speak to Red," Stephen had said. "He's making an awful ass of himself over Lola."

"Red? He has more sense than that."

"It's sex, not sense. Lola's working and they commute together."

Frank had been unable to believe it. "Red takes the eight-seventeen. Don't tell me Lola gets up that early. I know her too well."

"That's how serious it is," Stephen had said.

"But I heard she was going with Walter Ames."

"She was, until he went in the army. No single men around except Jon, and he's impervious. So she picked on Red."

Frank had never been able to convince himself that the affair was serious. Red, big and earthy and direct, who wanted nothing better than a morning with a broken-down motor, and Lola who hated the country except in small, week-end doses. It simply couldn't be.

But impossible or not, it had happened. and Frank wondered what Lola's real reason was. For anyone else, the answer would

have been obvious. Red had money and background. Add a basic human warmth, and any girl in the world would want him.

But Lola wasn't any girl in the world. She was a proud, talented, sharp, shy, dissatisfied girl. Her family was an old one and Lola had relatives scattered throughout the township.

"Every idiot I see is my second cousin," she'd remarked once. "Frank, how would you like to see all the morons in the village walking around and wearing your own nose?"

"I'd say hurrah for the idiots."

"Pooh!" she'd exclaimed. "My beautiful heritage!"

But where Lola sought to deny her background, her brother, Arthur, used it and made the most of it. A man gifted with tallness and blond wavy hair and with grey eyes set deep and murky, he had once told Frank how, because of his soft swirling hair, he had been regarded as a cissy in school. And Frank, watching the surly twist to Arthur's mouth and listening to him tell about his boyhood problems, wondered whether Arthur hadn't consciously developed the aggressive scowl with which he met all comers.

Whether he had or not, it gave him an appearance of strength and authority. He paraded his dour, crusty cynicism in the village and people were awed. They'd made him fire warden, councilman. He took his honours with a surly composure and performed his duties conscientiously. He had become a big shot in town affairs, and with the advent of civilian defence he had headed half the volunteer organizations, and been compelled to refuse the other half.

It was a choice item of gossip that Arthur hadn't been invited to the wedding. Even the postman had mentioned it.

"On account of that feud of his with Red, I reckon. Arthur works on the night shift, down at Eastern Aircraft, and so they set the wedding for ten o'clock when he can't come. If I was you, Frank, I'd take the pair of them and smack their heads together." He'd stared moodily. "I got two cents coming in postage, from last week."

Frank had paid the two cents. "All I'm doing is giving the wedding. *You* tell 'em." The postman had driven off.

But the truth of the matter was quite different. Arthur hadn't been invited because Lola didn't want him.

It had taken Frank a long time and a chain of incidents to believe that Lola really hated her brother. They had managed to hide it from the community, and yet, from the first moment that Frank had walked into the Blithe house, the antagonism was thrust at him.

After Lola had introduced the two men Arthur had scowled for a few painful seconds, as if he were trying to make up his mind whether to poke Frank in the jaw or to shake hands and be amiable. Eventually, he had decided on a grudging and tentative politeness.

"Glad to know you, Danzig. Drink?"

Lola had interrupted at once. "Arthur, you're not getting drunk tonight and you're not going to make Frank drunk. Come on, Frank—I want to go out."

In front of the house, he'd opened the car door for her. She'd hesitated momentarily, as if she were afraid to get in, and he'd leaned forward and kissed her. Her response was pure fire.

When he'd finally drawn away, breathless with something other than ecstasy, he'd known that he'd have an affair with her and that it would be no smooth, unruffled idyl.

"I've been wanting to do that," he'd said, "ever since I set eyes on you. And not because you're sweet, either."

She hadn't minded. "Anyone can be sweet. I'm not and I never want to be."

He rolled over on the hard sheen of the striped coverlet and drew his nails along the edge. They made a rasping sound.

One afternoon he and Lola had gone swimming in Bill Rapier's pond. Red and Kathy had been there and the Stephen Sirs, but they'd wandered up to the house. Lola was lounging at the edge of the wooden dock, wetting her toes and playing with a sliver of wood. Eileen Rapier, blonde and creamy as a soapsud, came half-way from the house and called to them to come on up and have a drink. Frank yelled that they'd be there in a moment.

"You enjoyed yourself this afternoon, didn't you?" said Frank. "You like this."

"Swimming? Leisure? So do you."

"That isn't quite what I mean. The so-called smart set. Stephen Sir, the writer. Jon, the painter. All of us here, with houses and enough money to be comfortable. Clever talk and *New Yorker* stuff. You're the little local girl, and you've made it."

"You don't have to be insulting," she'd said. "Frank, you're nothing but a snob!"

He'd scratched his ear. "Who, me?"

"You believe that people who were born here are a little less than dirt. You hire them and give them work and so you think you're better than they are."

Frank had yawned. "Forget it, Lola."

"I won't forget it, and some day this little local girl is going to twist every neck on the road."

"Won't do you a bit of good. Come on up and let's get our drink."

"I don't think I'll drink. I don't feel like sitting in Bill Rapier's golden sty."

"Mind if I go, anyhow? You can clean me off when I come out."

"You won't need a cleaning, but I would. That's the difference between us."

"Sure," he'd said. "I'm the finer sex."

He glanced at the luminous dial of his watch and then took another glass of water. In a half hour or so, he'd have to get up. He'd take a quick shower and a double shot of Scotch. That ought to carry him through the evening.

He'd heard stories about Lola, but he'd never believed them. Even if she'd had dinner in town with Bill Rapier a couple of times, that didn't mean she was having an affair with him. And as for the business about her never paying her bills—maybe she slipped up occasionally, but that was pure carelessness. Money had never meant anything to her. She took what she needed, and threw away what she had no immediate use for. Even the books and the furniture in this room—he'd told her to take them, but she hadn't bothered. If she'd been money-minded, she'd have grabbed the stuff and sold it.

Things had never been easy for her. Orphaned, talented and intellectual and yet labelled a native by the city snobs—naturally she'd grown up with a chip on her shoulder. All her mannerisms, her sharpness and her pseudo-hate of people—they merely meant that fundamentally she was unsure of herself.

Frank thought of the day they'd gone on a picnic, up the steep

hill behind his house and along a wooded ridge from which they caught occasional glimpses of the lake. It wasn't quite the Alps, but for Westchester County it was all right.

They'd eaten their sandwiches and were lying on their stomachs, hand in hand, listening to the sounds of the forest. The buzzing of hundreds of unseen insects. The breeze blasting furiously through the trees and then vanishing pointlessly into the distance. He'd been satisfied with the light touch of her hand, with the knowledge that by and by they'd talk. They had a contentment, a special understanding which was intensely personal.

Frank was thinking that presently she'd start off with one of her sharp aphorisms and that he'd whittle her down, slowly, flirting and making fun of her, until the sun poked through the big pine and landed squarely on her face. Then she'd roll towards him and he'd reach out and kiss her. And somehow, the waiting and the laziness and the sureness of what would happen were good, and he lay quietly, relishing the moment as something not duplicated.

But she couldn't wait. Suddenly, without warning, she'd flung herself at him with a strange, tormented passion that was as insatiable as it was wild and savage. And later, lying quietly together, she'd refused to marry him.

He hadn't asked, but she'd thought it out and she showed him, point by point, why she wouldn't. "I'm a bitch, Frank. I'd nag you and pick at your brains and make you the unhappiest man on the road. I'm restless and discontented and I'd give you no peace. After a while you'd resent it, and you'd begin to hate me. You see, Frank dear, it just wouldn't do. You see, don't you?"

"Wait till you're asked," he'd said.

"You shouldn't even see me, ever again."

"You talk like a *femme fatale* and you look like a cherub, and all you really are is a mixed-up Cinderella."

"Call me a psychopath and you'll be nearer the truth."

"I'll call you what I damn' please. And I'll make you a cherub in spite of yourself."

"That's just it. You want me to be what I'm not. If I were sweet, I'd be terrible."

"You're terrible anyhow. That's what I like about you. That and your sweetness."

"Frank, you're impossible."

"So are you. And it might be a good combination at that."

"It would be a horrible one. We'd fight in front of company and get drunk in front of the cook."

"Don't be so romantic. *You'll* be the cook."

"Pooh!" was all she said.

"A very ordinary remark."

"Then twice pooh! I can't cook and I'd give you indigestion. I want a chef and a private maid who's called by her last name."

"You want a lot of things you'll never get."

It took him a long time to fall in love with her, for he was both attracted and repelled. He couldn't put aside the picture of Lola and her brother, of the hate and hypocrisy that she carried off so well.

"I have a conscience like a tin roof," he told her once. "Noisy, but nothing really sticks. And yet I'm damned if I could live with a brother and hate him."

"It doesn't bother me a bit."

"You'd like to talk," he'd said. And she'd looked at him and laughed.

He could still hear her laughter, and it made him shiver. It seemed to come from all around, but that was crazy, of course, because she wasn't in the room.

By and by he placed it. Of course. She was downstairs, in the game-room directly underneath. If he stepped out to the balcony and called to her, she'd come. She'd stand on the platform below and he could tell her to call off the marriage. No minister.

Frank remembered how she'd refused him when he'd finally proposed. "I love you too much, Frank," she'd said. "I'd make life hell for anybody I lived with. I can't help it. I'm made that way. I ought to marry somebody I hate."

And now, she was marrying Red.

Frank stood up, swaying, standing there in Lola's room, the violent purple room that she'd never use and that no one else had ever used. He rubbed his eyes and weaved towards the balcony. The night air might clear his head. If only it weren't so oppressive. If only it were cool, fresh . . .

He put his hand on the heavy stone flower-box and then

remembered it wasn't fastened, that he'd tried to take it down the other day and couldn't. He'd loosened it and figured it would fall by itself, but it hadn't. So he'd propped it up with a two-by-four and warned Alice not to stand underneath. He supposed it was safe enough.

He looked down and saw Lola, a vague and shadowy figure that weaved and wouldn't stay quite still. She was wearing a wide, flowing cape and her head was cast down and she had some white flowers woven into her hair. She was staring at the millrace and he remembered a conversation they'd once had. They'd been talking about marriage and she'd said, as she was always saying at that time, that it wouldn't work out between them. She wasn't for him; she didn't know why, but she was too complicated, too intense and demanding. He needed someone simple and solid and steady, someone he could hang on to.

"You couldn't hang on to me, Frank dear. It wouldn't do."

He'd taken her two hands in his, her soft woman's hands that met his with so much trust, and he'd said: "Isn't that up to me, Lola? I think I'm old enough to decide whom I want to marry."

She'd stepped out to the stone platform, so close to the edge that he'd wanted to grab her lest she fall. Then she'd turned to him and smiled. "Frank, dear, if I ever married you, I'd do it for one reason. For this. I'd know I could always escape, because I can't swim."

"What would you want to escape from? Think I'm an ogre?"

"You know what I mean. I can't be possessed, the way other women are."

He'd been about to answer lightly, sarcastically, but he'd changed his mind. "In other words," he'd said, "if you learn to swim, I'll know you've given up all thought of marrying me. I don't know whether you're being subtle or coy."

"It's like carrying a vial of poison with me, just in case. I'd need that, Frank, for fear of harming you too much. When I got too bad, I'd have to jump in. Otherwise, you might push me." Then she'd turned to him with her large, glowing grey eyes and she'd murmured: "Life isn't so good. It isn't worth so much nor does it mean so much. If you'll get any satisfaction from pushing me, you may, Frank dear."

"Thanks," he'd said dryly. "But I'm not in the habit of chucking women into millstreams."

He thought now of that conversation and he thought of her approaching marriage. And this afternoon he'd told himself that there were ways.

A kind of delirium seized him and with it came a queer, throbbing dizziness. He reached out to steady himself against the stone flower-box. As his hand seized it, the thing gave way and the whole house seemed to topple. He heard something splash, and in a panic he went staggering back and slammed the balcony door.

Like a drunken man he crossed the room and sat down on the shiny purple bed. The smooth satin felt cold against his dry burning skin. No light was lit, but the white bright stripes were luminous and seemed to cast a gleam that suffused the entire room. In his ears he could still hear the echo of the splash. Suddenly, uncontrollably, he was sick.

After a while he stood up. He heard voices down there on the platform. He tried to distinguish them, but he caught only a low, confused murmur, blurred by the swish of the water.

He wanted to hear Lola's voice. Desperately, he wanted to hear it. He had to see her smiling slowly and telling him yes, it was better this way, that she should never have thought of marrying Red.

Frank stood up. The balcony door was closed. He had to walk across the room and open the door so that he could find out whether the stone window-box was still there. He had to know whether he'd been dreaming this thing in his fever or whether . . . Lola . . .

He tried to say it, but he kept skipping the words. Whether . . . Lola. He could walk forward eight feet and open a door and he'd find out. Whether he'd . . . Lola.

He didn't want to know. He needed to be uncertain. Every fibre of him craved for severance from the act and for an ignorance of whether he'd performed it. He wanted to go downstairs to his guests, talk to them, have a drink with them and sit down as if nothing had happened. He wanted to see Alice's smile, to kid Red and answer Sergeant's questions and hear Stephen Sir's latest story. He wanted to be the old, carefree Frank.

He might manage it, on the surface, if he didn't know. He might be able to sit down in one of the rows of chairs and listen

to Mathilda Sir grind out the familiar, booming bars of Mendelssohn. He'd sit there with his guests and at the proper time he'd turn slowly and gaze at the open doors and wonder whether she'd step through. Everyone would expect her, but he wouldn't. He wouldn't know. Everyone would be surprised and curious and then shocked when she didn't march through the open doors. But he wouldn't have any feeling at all, no surprise and no wonder, because he didn't know.

He didn't know whether—he'd—killed—Lola.

He'd said it at last and now he moved forward dully, with his eyes on the violet carpet that no one but Lola and himself had ever trod upon. He pushed the door slowly and stepped over the sill.

Princess, his Persian cat, was on the roof, somewhere above. He heard her meeow. Then he looked down.

The stone flower-box was still in place. Below it, he saw the white band of a floral headdress. Lola was standing there, unharmed.

CHAPTER FIVE

FRANK drew a deep breath and rubbed his forehead. The platform on which Lola was standing projected beyond the balcony so that without effort Frank looked down on her. Both he and Lola were in shadow, but the lights of the house illuminated the opposite bank of the ravine and turned it into a twisted patchwork of evil. The trunk of a tall, black pine, denuded of its lower branches, towered up beyond the level of the house and lost itself amongst the stars. To the left, some fifty feet away, the stream tumbled over a pile of rocks and hit the bottom of the canyon with a low, steady roar. The music from a radio came jumbled and blurred.

Frank wondered why Lola didn't look up. He had an impulse to call to her, but something held him off. Besides, there was nothing to say.

Suddenly he laughed, soundlessly, in a hard tight silence that drained him of breath and left him with empty lungs and bunched, aching muscles. And still Lola stood there, unhearing, unaware that someone was just a few feet away, staring at her and thanking his gods that he wasn't a murderer.

Still in the grip of that strange unreality, Frank leaned forward and touched the stone flower-box. Then he saw how he'd made his mistake. When he'd tried to move the stone trough a couple of days ago he'd had to rip out the railing. Later, when he'd given up the job, he'd remembered Princess's habit of climbing to the third floor and diving down at the railing. And, knowing the cat couldn't see the balustrade when she took off from above, he had replaced the section of railing without fastening it too securely. It was this that he had knocked off a few minutes ago. In his feverish, unnatural state, he'd thought he'd pushed loose the entire mass of stone.

Nevertheless the shaky feeling stayed with him. The reaction to his experience left him giddy and light-headed, and he felt a weakness in his knees. He clamped his jaw tight. Then Princess meowed again, and he looked up.

He heard the patter of her feet and he knew she had jumped.

He reached forward, reacting instinctively to the realization that there was nothing but space at the point where Princess expected to land.

He saw something white flying down at him and he knew his arms wouldn't reach. He flung himself forward and his fingers tangled in a thick ball of fur. Claws ripped through his shirt and left hot marks on his arm. Then his weight hit the two-by-four supporting the stone trough. This time it gave way. Five hundred pounds of stone and earth dropped with a dull, crushing thud.

Frank twisted his body to prevent himself from tumbling over the edge of the balcony. His head hit the floor. At the blow, combined with his fear and the last stunning attack of his sunstroke, he lost consciousness.

He had no idea how long he lay there. Five seconds or five minutes. When he opened his eyes, he saw Princess perched on the wreck of the balustrade and watching him with green, glittering eyes. The flower-box was gone.

He stood up groggily and lit a match. The yellow flame blinded him and he had to hold it to the side, away from his eyes. Then he looked at the platform below.

It was empty. There was no sign of Lola.

He blew out the match. His brain was clearer and strength began to flow through his body. He had no means of knowing what had happened. To the right, the stream flowed on darkly. To the left, towards the waterfall, lay the footbridge and the steep banks of the ravine.

He thought he saw motion and he peered into the darkness. Momentarily, a figure stood up and went scurrying into the brush. Then silence. The name which shot through Frank's mind was that of Arthur Blithe.

Frank turned abruptly, re-entered the room and sat down at the desk. He fumbled in his pockets for cigarettes, found a stale one and lit it. Faintly, he could still hear the radio. That might explain why no one had heard any noise. The radio, and the sound of the water.

He had to think this out. He'd knocked over a quarter-ton weight. If it had hit the platform where Lola had been standing the crash would have rocked the whole house and brought people

running. But no one was alarmed. Therefore Lola hadn't been hit.

On the other hand, if it hadn't struck her, she would have cried out. She hadn't cried out. Therefore she had been hit.

Frank shook his head. Two facts, both absolute, and the two of them mutually exclusive. His logic was wrong somewhere.

He started from another angle. If Lola had been struck, she was probably dead. But if she was dead, why hadn't the person Frank had seen in the thickets raised the alarm?

For that matter, why hadn't Frank?

The thought occurred to him for the first time. Had he been his normal self, his first impulse would have been to yell for help. But he hadn't.

The time to do anything was already past. If he rushed out of the room and blurted his news, either he'd make a fool of himself and needlessly spoil the wedding, or else his announcement would come too late. In any case, whatever had occurred had already happened, and he was caught up in it beyond all chance of escape.

He tamped out his cigarette and stood up. Then, hastily, he cleaned up the room. It was time to dress. Harry Marlowe would probably make the eight-fifty and Frank had to meet him when he arrived.

He crossed the room, put his hand on the knob and opened the door. He heard no hubbub of voices, walked past no clatter of conversation. He stood in shocked immobility. So the accident had been heard, after all, and everyone was outside. Then, from the top floor, he heard Alice calling to Mathilda Sir.

"Mathilda, I tried it your way, and the damn' cream still won't whip!"

Frank wanted to laugh with relief. Hastily, almost with glee, he mounted the half-flight to his bedroom. Alice wouldn't stand in the kitchen and try to whip cream while a major tragedy was occurring. Nobody knew of the accident and nobody was outside searching for Lola's body. The events of the last half hour were Frank's secret.

He entered the bathroom, found aspirin and a flask of whisky and took a dose of each. Then he got under the shower.

When he came out into the corridor some twenty minutes later, the house was normal. He heard voices from the balcony below. A

door opened from the bathroom across the hall and Eileen Rapier came out.

"Hello, Frank," she said. "Weddings always get me in the kidneys. Some people cry and some people get gay, but I just get weak in the kidneys and sneak off to the nearest john. Where were you?"

"I was tired and took a nap. Just got out of the shower. That's a lovely dress, Eileen."

She raised her skirts and pirouetted. "Bill's latest. He's putting in an expensive dress line, now that everybody's making so much money. Frank, all the men are telling smutty stories or something on the balcony and we're having a hen party in the kitchen. Do something about it, will you?"

"They're probably working on Red's morale. He has a tendency to collapse at a time like this."

"The blushing groom? I wish Bill had blushed when he married me. Just once. But instead, he grinned his head off because he'd gotten me away from a competitor."

"There must have been plenty of them."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I meant a business competitor. I used to work for another perfume house. See what you can do, Frank. Just one whistle and we'll come running, the whole troupe of us."

"Like this?" he said, and let out a long, low whistle.

"I said to call us," she remarked. "I didn't tell you to give us the bird."

Frank watched her legs as she went upstairs. He'd carried it off all right and now he turned and descended. A bit pale, a bit shaken, but smiling and cheerful and sure of himself, he passed the door to Lola's room and went on down to the balcony.

The first person he saw was Bill Rapier, leaning over the balcony railing and holding a crude, weatherworn leather coat in such a way that the light from the chandelier struck it. But at Frank's approach, Rapier turned around. He hesitated a moment, as if to give Frank time to absorb the brown slacks and the faultless fit of the white, semi-formal jacket.

For some reason the action annoyed Frank. His eye dropped critically to the short chubby figure, lifted to the complacent face built on the broad, blunt chin and then was caught by the grains

of earth clinging to Bill's shoulder. Frank flicked them off, and they scattered readily.

"Fall?" asked Frank, smiling.

Bill shook his head. "No. Must have rubbed against something." He raised the leather garment and tapped it. "What's this, Frank? I never saw it before."

"That? It's the original costume that the Leather Man wore."

The legend of the Leather Man had obsessed Frank ever since he'd first heard of it. The Leather Man had died about fifty years ago, but there were still people who remembered him. A big, uncouth figure, always dressed in bulky leather clothes which he cut and sewed himself. A strange, bearded creature who never spoke and who roamed the countryside, from Connecticut to Westchester, making the same rounds, sleeping in the same caves, reappearing at any given point at the same hour, every thirty-four days. Muttering a strange gibberish. Shy, easily frightened. Asking for nothing, accepting only scraps of food and bits of leather. An outcast, atoning to the end for some nameless crime.

Frank felt a slight shiver go through him. He, too, was a moral outcast, and he felt a strange, remote fear, an unreasoning sense of affinity to the distorted concept that went by the name of the Leather Man.

Then he heard Bill's voice speaking to him, saw Bill's light brown eyebrows lift questioningly. With an effort of will, Frank jerked back his attention.

"Where did you get it?" Rapier was asking.

"A friend of mine that works for the county found it stored in an old warehouse. When I told him I was collecting Leather Man material and had a cave on my property—you know, the one that connects with the stream after it goes underground—he let me have the thing."

Frank moved forward and then they saw him, his friends, and they called out his name and asked him where he'd been, and to his surprise he answered easily. He was here in his own home, amongst the people he liked. He was safe. No one would cast him out. Ever. His momentary kinship with the Leather Man had been unreal; it had been the last feverish symptom brought on by his sunstroke.

Red yelled, "There he is—the guy that made me haul five sacks of cement on my wedding night!"

Frank laughed. "You needed the exercise, Red, to relieve your tension."

"Tension!" exclaimed Red. "I could move the Empire State Building and I'd still be shaking!" He lifted his glass in two hands to keep it steady, but the palsy followed him to his lips and he had to put the glass down. The whole room was in an uproar. "I tell you," bellowed Red, "I'm so nervous I can't even control my damn' hands. What's funny about that?"

Stephen Sir, soft-voiced, dark and suave, said: "You're not half so nervous as I am, Red. Mathilda's supposed to play the Wedding March, and you know what she's been rehearsing all afternoon? *Til Eulenspiegel!*"

Frank joined in the gales of laughter. But Mathilda should, he kept thinking, have rehearsed a funeral march as the encore.

He caught Sergeant Penscott's eye and Sergeant shook his head sadly. It was notorious that Red couldn't hold his liquor.

"How many has he had?" asked Frank, in a low voice.

"I gave him a nip just before we came over. A very little one, and that was over an hour ago. Why do I get punished with a son that can't drink? If he couldn't have alcoholic immunity from heredity, the least he could have done was to pick it up from his environment. Tell me, when is your minister coming?"

Frank glanced at his watch. "He's due any minute now."

Frank turned away and noticed Jon Sebastian Block. The painter was standing alone in one corner. With his long, sedate face, his droopy moustache and his tan, silky hair, he gave an impression of deep seriousness, of some inner reticence which made him unable to join the horse-play.

He motioned to Frank and moved his lips. Frank started to edge over, but Bill Rapier grabbed his sleeve.

"Frank," said Rapier, "I have some Scotch outside in my car. I brought it along, just in case."

"Thanks," said Frank, "but I think I have plenty."

Rapier's bland, chubby face showed disappointment. "It's the best stuff there is, Frank. Cost me eight bucks a bottle."

Frank shrugged and moved towards the corner. "Hello, Jon. You look lost."

Jon nodded. "Frank, I've been looking for you ever since I got here. I'm no good at unravelling situations, and something's happened. Where's Lola?"

"In the game-room, I think. Dressing."

"Is anyone with her?"

"Not that I know of. Why? What's bothering you?"

"Frank, this wedding has to be stopped!"

Frank grabbed Jon's arm. "What's the matter? What happened, Jon?"

Jon blinked and drew a deep sigh. "I didn't mean to be so startling. I'm probably crazy. Just something working on my mind and it had to come out." He smiled quietly, with a shy, reserved gesture that showed his fondness for Frank. "Let's call it intuition."

"Yes, but what?"

Then a clear, ringing voice sounded from the staircase. "Mr. Danzig? Mr. Kerrigan?"

It was Harry Marlowe. With his strongly modelled features, his flowing white hair and his air of confidence, everyone present took him on faith and realized at once that he was the minister.

Frank turned and said: "I'm Danzig. You're the Reverend Marlowe, of course. Glad to know you. This is Mr. Kerrigan, the groom. And his father, Mr. Penscott, who's going to be best man."

They shook hands and Frank spoke to Rapier. "Bill, will you give your wife a whistle and get the women downstairs? Alice knows where to seat people. I have to stay here a few minutes with Red and the minister."

Bill grinned, put his fingers to his mouth and let out a shrill, ear-splitting sound. Harry Marlowe jumped and said in his slow, deliberate tones, "For a moment, I thought it was the police."

"Just a man calling to his wife," said Frank. "Now, about the ceremony—as I told you, we want something simple. I have a form here which you could use, provided you have no objection—"

"Certainly not," said Harry, grabbing the book. "You don't mind if I read it first, do you?"

"Not at all," said Frank quickly, and went on to explain the

details of the setting. The bride who was to march from the game-room at the rear, the number of guests, where the best man would stand—

"That's me," said little Sergeant. "His father. I clutch the ring and keep Red from falling over in a dead faint. He's kind of big and you may have to give me a hand, Reverend, but you won't mind. You look healthy. You ought to be experienced at this kind of thing. Where's your congregation? What denomination do you belong to? Ever see a groom this scared?"

Ceremoniously, Marlowe put on his glasses. "It's quite natural," he remarked. "Still, I never married a more nervous man. If you gentlemen will leave me alone with the groom for a few moments, I'd like to speak to him. You see, Mr. Kerrigan, whether you realize it or not, you have the most pleasant job of us all. You merely stand there and say yes, and you acquire a wife for your trouble."

Downstairs, in the big, two-storied living-room with the great oak rafters, Alice had seated the guests. A few neighbours had dropped in for the ceremony, in addition to the small group who were to stay for supper. Just the Sirs, the Rapiers, Jon and Kathy. The wedding party would consist of ten people. Later, there was to be an open-house reception.

Alice had kept a vacant chair next to her and she was sitting uncomfortably, craning her neck and glancing towards the rear of the room. As soon as she saw Frank her black eyes smiled, and she signalled to him. He came over and sat down next to her.

"Feeling more in the mood for a wedding?" he asked in a low voice.

She smiled again. "Yes, it's getting more and more like. Where were you, Frank?"

"I had a nap."

"You do look better."

He squeezed her hand. "The decorations look lovely. For a social service worker, you're a hell of a fine florist. Who helped you, Monkey? The girls from camp?"

"Yes. We denuded every flower-patch and ended up going after buttercups. They're the yellow patch at the crown of the altar."

Frank hummed "Sweet Little Buttercup", and Alice moved closer. "Remember us?" she asked.

"Mm. City Hall and a clerk muttering the ceremony so fast he almost tripped up. You were in your light blue suit, with your orchid crumpled because I'd just kissed you, and you looked as if you were ready to cry. When it came your turn to say 'I do', you yelled it so loud that the clerk jumped back and almost lost his glasses. I was wondering whether I'd have to pay for them if they busted."

Alice purred. "It sort of exploded out of me, didn't it?"

Frank nodded. "That was a lot of fun, Alice. Let's do it again some day."

She stroked his hand. Sergeant and Red strode solemnly down the aisle and took their places at one side of the floral decoration. Harry Marlowe followed, opened the pamphlet Frank had given him and studied the words. Frank's heart was beating madly. A fake wedding and a murdered bride. It occurred to him for the first time that Harry's impersonation might have serious consequences.

Frank had an impulse to jump up and expose the whole hoax. But he didn't. He wet his lips and turned to Alice. "Aren't they going to begin?" he asked.

"Kathy's supposed to signal Mathilda when Lola's ready, and then Mathilda plays and Lola and Kathy walk in. Mathilda could start a while, couldn't she? And then swing into the Wedding March when the door opens. Shall I tell her?"

"Good idea," said Frank.

Alice rose and Frank watched her walk to the piano. A tall, dark girl who moved like a dancer. Leaning over the piano Mathilda, brawny and brash and bubbling with good will, nodded energetically. Stephen, reserved, aesthetic, with an almost girlish quality, waved at her. Lola had always referred to them as Stephen and his mother.

Alice returned and Mathilda pounded out an opening chord. She played without looking at the piano. She kept turning around and glancing at the library door. When it finally began to open, her great shoulders raised as she drew in a breath of relief. Her strong, capable hands banged down and she shifted triumphantly to the opening bars of the Wedding March.

Then the door swung wide. Kathy was standing there alone.

Her face was pale, her light blue eyes were bewildered. She swayed slightly and clutched the knob. Suddenly her voice screeched out.

"She's not there!" she screamed. "Lola's not there—she's gone!"

The shrill hysteria of her voice filled the room and for a moment it drowned out the piano. Manfully, aggressively, Mathilda played on until the last high echoes of the voices had gone. Then Mathilda sloughed off, reluctantly, until she came to a full stop.

Frank stared at the floral piece. Chairs were clattering and feet shuffling in an excited stampede. Red rushed down the side of the room with the little, gnome-like Sergeant trailing him like a fussy hen. Marlowe stuffed the booklet in his pocket and took off in hot pursuit. Alice's hand pulled away from Frank's.

He could pick out the zinnias and phlox and the black-eyed susans in the floral piece, but he couldn't see how Alice had fastened them. He tilted his neck and glimpsed a bit of white cloth. He figured out that Alice must have used her ironing board.

He had a clever wife. Before she'd left her Washington job she'd been offered an increase in salary if she'd stay, and she'd been told there was a job waiting for her whenever she came back. She'd picked up a pencil in Jon's study one day and made a rough sketch of Frank. Jon had thought it amazing and had told her she ought to study art. For all her quietness and her youth, unbelievable things happened inside her head.

Unbelievable things happened inside Frank's head, too. Very slowly he turned around. He was alone. Everybody had rushed into the card-room except him.

He straightened his tie, lit a cigarette and carefully blew out the match. There was no ash-tray near him. He waited for the match to finish smoking. He wet his fingers and squeezed the end of the match. It was warm, but it didn't burn. He put it in his pocket. Then, painfully, woodenly, he stood up.

So—he had.

CHAPTER SIX

THE game-room was a small, oval room with a bank of french doors that opened on to the crescent-shaped platform where Lola had been standing.

Recently, Alice had repainted the room. "I want something bright and unusual," she'd said, and she'd succeeded.

The walls were orange, with blue base-boards and mouldings. The small bar repeated the orange, but Alice had decorated the sides with geometric patterns in red and blue and pink. Frank had watched with misgivings. Alice's folly, he'd called it, and had never made up his mind whether the room was gay and debonair or just plain ugly.

It was ugly now, he decided, with the green ping-pong table folded and propped against the orange wall and with the three-leaved mirror from Alice's vanity set up on a card table for Lola's use.

Eileen Rapier was sitting at the improvised vanity, fingering the tray of cosmetics with professional interest. After due thought, she picked up the lipstick and applied it to her own mouth.

"I don't know how she could have used this shade," she remarked. "She wasn't nearly blonde enough to stand it."

Mathilda, standing behind her and watching every move, exploded. "You fool—is that all you're interested in?"

Eileen turned coolly. "You might give it a thought some day, Mathilda. But then, you have so many more important things to do, haven't you?"

"At least I don't scavenge bits of abandoned lipstick," snapped Mathilda. But she flushed and moved away.

Red was sitting at the bar and holding his head in his hands. Alice murmured "Red—Red," and slid her fingers through his hair. Kathy hovered near by, wanting to speak to him but not quite sure whether she had the right.

People—people. They flung open the balcony door and it stuck, the way it always did, and immediately they struggled to

slam it shut because Lola wasn't there. They dashed aimlessly into the room and then ran out. Some of them were still searching in the darkness outside, yelling at each other and moving vaguely, futilely, because they were impelled to do something. Sheepishly, they began to return.

Frank looked around for Sergeant and couldn't find him. Jon, at the far end of the bar, hands in his pockets, immersed in his own aloofness, stood like a great immovable boulder and smiled quietly as his eyes met Frank's. Guiltily, Frank looked away. The next person he noticed was Bill Rapier.

Bill was smiling, too, but with suppressed glee. For some reason he was glad. Frankly, completely and colossally glad.

The room was small and Frank bumped into somebody and said "Sorry," without knowing to whom he had spoken. He kept roaming around, aimlessly picking up objects and putting them down again. The chessmen standing on a small table in the corner. A stray liqueur glass. A swizzle stick that he'd brought from Cuba. An old pipe. A beer mug. A Chinese coin.

He was smoking again and he didn't remember where he'd got the cigarette or when he'd lit it. He put it down and noticed it was a brand he didn't even have in the house. He nearly upset an ash-tray. He tripped over a heavy, leather boot with a wooden sole. He stared as if he'd never seen the thing before. Then he remembered. It was part of the Leather Man outfit. He'd put it here to use as a waste basket.

Jon picked up an empty whisky bottle and was studying it with the same rapt attention that had characterized him all evening long. Harry Marlowe was standing next to Frank and speaking in a low voice.

"What do you think happened, Frank? Why can't they find her?"

Frank started, as if a spell had been broken. He glanced at Harry's bland, open face and thought of school assemblies and faculty conferences and the casual, sympathetic relationship he'd established with his assistant principal. Frank had no right to get him into a mess.

Frank smiled and felt the warmth of Harry's personality. "I don't know," remarked Frank. "There's no telling what Lola

would do. You'd better get out of here, Harry. I had no idea, when I asked you——”

“Of course not. If there's any way I can help——”

“No, thanks all the same. Listen, Harry. Take my car—the station wagon in the garage. The keys are in it. Drive it to the station and leave it there, with the keys in the glove compartment. I'll pick it up tomorrow. Know the road?”

“I think I can find it.”

“Good. Then slip out now, before everybody gets back. I'll cover you. And better not 'phone me, either. I'll get in touch next time I'm in town.”

Little Sergeant came trotting into the room. He sighted Marlowe and said: “Hello, Reverend. They don't do things like this in your bailiwick, do they? Where do you come from? Yonkers, you said?”

“Yes. The city that's buried in the outskirts of New York.”

“I used to live there, on Maple Avenue. That white house at the top of the hill. Know it?”

“I seem to remember it vaguely.”

“Where's your church, Reverend? What denomination is it? You know, it's queer I never heard of you.”

Harry blinked serenely and Frank came to his rescue. “Mr. Marlowe's only there temporarily. Look, Sergeant—we ring him in on a wedding and then we don't even produce the bride. We ought to apologize instead of badgering him with questions.”

“I always ask questions. When people answer, they think they've done me a favour and they get to like me. What denomination, Reverend? How much do they pay you?”

“He's a Mohammedan,” said Frank. “The only practising Mohammedan in Yonkers. Look, Sergeant—we're having trouble enough. Don't complicate it by being neurotic.”

Sergeant's bright blue eyes flashed. “Why not?” he demanded. “I bristle with neuroses and I love every one of them. They make life interesting. I used to hate salmon because the taste was wet and fishy, and that was dull as hell. Then I spoke to a psychiatrist and he gave me the most fascinating reasons, all about being in love with my mother and hating my father and the way he smacked his lips over a can of salmon. I used to be ashamed of hating it,

and now I love to hate it. I watch everybody eat it and I feel superior because I had a better traumatic experience with salmon than anybody I know. And you don't want me to be neurotic!"

Frank only half listened. Jon, still holding the whisky bottle, crossed the room. Bill Rapier was staring at the french doors and had put his hand on the knob. Soon he'd open the door and go outside and search the platform. He'd see the stone chips where the flower-box had smashed. Then he'd ask questions and somebody would remember hearing a noise and by and by Frank would have to admit he'd been in Lola's study.

He still didn't understand about the noise. To be sure, there was the roar of the waterfall. "You never hear anything in this house." Alice had said it and Frank's sister had said it, often. But when a quarter-ton weight smashes down on a stone platform you hear it.

Bill Rapier opened the door. Jon and the whisky bottle had disappeared. Sergeant suspected something, and even though he'd never lived in Yonkers and probably knew less about it than Harry Marlowe, Sergeant was on the trail and he wouldn't let up until he'd reached the end.

"What denomination do you belong to?" he asked again.

"He's a Presbyterian and his church is on King Street and he makes thirty-seven hundred a year," said Frank. "He has two wives and three children and he has to go home. You've never been in Yonkers in your life, Sergeant. Anything else?"

Red kept saying: "It isn't possible. Look—she was right in here, waiting. How could she go anywhere?"

Rapier had stepped outside and was staring at the stream. Frank took Sergeant's arm and propelled him towards Red. Harry seemed to melt away.

"She might have come out here," said Rapier. He was still smiling, still gloating and trying to conceal his glee. "She might have had an accident," he said.

Abruptly, Red looked up. He saw Bill standing at the entrance to the platform, pointing to the stream. Red jumped to his feet and knocked over the stool he'd been sitting on.

"She was always eccentric," he said hoarsely. "Always doing the unexpected. Maybe she forgot something. Maybe she decided

at the last minute that she just didn't like weddings. How the hell do you know what happened to her?"

"Why don't you 'phone?" asked Frank.

Red spun around. "'Phone," he said. "Yes, of course. Good idea. She might be home."

"Use the one upstairs," said Frank. "It will be quieter."

Red staggered out of the room, down the three wide steps to the dropped living-room, and disappeared up the spiral stairs. In the quiet that followed Bill Rapier said, "Anyone got a flashlight?"

"What for?" asked Sergeant, and Bill smiled contentedly as he gave the obvious answer. "Maybe she fell in."

"That," said Mathilda in a loud, angry voice, "is the first sensible suggestion I've heard."

Frank said "Thanks, Mathilda," and walked towards the bar. "I think there's one here, in the drawer." He found it amongst the bar gadgets. "Here, Bill," he said. "Want to look?"

Rapier took the light and stepped outside. Timidly, Stephen Sir produced a flashlight from his pocket and followed Bill.

"Where does the stream go?" asked Sergeant abruptly. "How deep is it? What are the chances?"

"Not much," said Frank grimly. "It's about ten feet deep right here. It races to the end of the ravine and then goes underground. You can pick up one section of the underground stream from the old Leather Man cave at the back."

A thin metal rod seemed to be swinging at the back of Frank's head. He relived the scene where Lola had told him that the stream would be like a vial of poison. Yes. But she hadn't married him.

"She couldn't swim," said Frank. "Not a stroke."

Then Bill and Stephen came back. "Not a sign of her," said Bill. "Of course, we ought to look in the daytime, and the stream will have to be dragged, but . . ." he shrugged.

Frank raised his voice. "Listen, all of you," he said. "While Red's gone, let's see what we can find out. It's ten-twenty now. It was about ten when Kathy went for her. How long were you there, Kathy?"

"Only a few seconds," she replied. "I slipped in just before Mathilda started playing. Lola was supposed to call me, and she

didn't. When I saw Alice speak to Mathilda, I went in anyhow. I didn't see her. I called, and then I looked in the lavatory, and then I came out and yelled."

"Previous to that," said Frank. "Who saw her?"

No one answered. Frank said: "Alice, could you get your service squad and hand out food and drinks? Then we'll go in the living-room and sit down and figure this out. The trouble is we're all nervous and excited. And starved, too. Logic doesn't function on an empty stomach. Come on."

With a plate of sandwiches on his lap and a highball within reach, Frank took up the interrogation again.

"We have to work backward," he began. "At least half of you must have seen Lola today. Speak up, somebody."

There was a long pause. Then Stephen said: "I saw her this afternoon. We did some work together, on our book."

"That's helpful," exclaimed Mathilda. "Maybe you can prove that she got here, too. And that she was going to a wedding."

"Good idea, at that," remarked Frank. "Who came down with her to the house?"

"I did," said Kathy softly. "Around eight. She was wearing her wedding outfit, but she hadn't fixed her hair or done anything else. I offered to help, but she refused. She said she wanted to be alone."

"Did she say why?"

"No. It was peculiar, of course. Most people want company at a time like that. I thought she might change her mind and I came down and knocked on her door a few times, but she said please, if I didn't object, she wanted to be alone."

"When was the last time you spoke to her, and heard her answer?"

Kathy frowned and Frank held his breath. If Lola had been alive after nine, then the flower-box hadn't killed her. Nine or thereabouts. That was the deadline.

"I'm not sure," said Kathy hesitantly. "I saw her about eight-thirty, and I looked at my watch. And after that, I don't know exactly." She took a quick breath. "Maybe about a quarter past nine. I have such a bad sense of time."

"Three quarters of an hour and you didn't go back?"

"No. She'd been so—definite. She seemed annoyed at being interrupted."

"Interrupted at what?" asked Frank. "What was she doing?"

Kathy's reply was so low that Frank leaned forward to hear her. "I don't know," she said. "She was talking to somebody."

Arthur, of course. Arthur had sneaked in, via the french windows. He'd tried to prevent the marriage. He and Lola had quarrelled. She'd known he would come. That was why she'd insisted on being alone.

The whole structure of someone else's fault built up in Frank's mind. If he could show Arthur had still been there, after nine, then Frank would know he was innocent. Lola's voice—the skulking figure . . .

"To whom was she talking?" asked Frank. "Have you any idea?"

Kathy shook her head in the negative. She looked so scared, so alone and unprotected, that Frank wanted to put his arm round her and tell her not to worry, that it was no one's fault, he'd merely dropped a stone trough on Lola's head and Kathy needn't fret.

Frank forced himself to look away. Eileen, so smug and self-centred. Bill gleeful and Jon bemused and Mathilda truculent. And Alice . . .

Alice spoke dreamily, in her quiet, soothing voice, as if she were telling one of her camp girls not to be home-sick, that her friends really liked her and she should go out and play.

"I was talking to her," said Alice. "It must have been me that Kathy heard."

"What were you doing?"

"I brought her a cup of tea and some crackers. Lola said she was hungry and I brought her a tray. It was a little before nine."

"What did you talk about?" asked Frank.

Alice smiled, but she was too casual. Alice, full of excitement and wanting to help. Alice, who was so packed with good-will that it burst out of her. She shouldn't have tried to be casual. It was a giveaway. It told Frank she was lying.

"We didn't talk about anything important," she said, and she stifled a non-existent yawn. "Her hair-do, her dress. The guests. Just small talk."

The footsteps sounded on the balcony above and clumped heavily. Frank looked at the spiral stairway in the corner and saw Red's white shoes and Red's white trousers and the blue tie on the white shirt. Then Frank looked away.

He saw the Leather Man boot again. Big, heavy, clumsy. It would weigh ten pounds. The leather costume weighed about fifty. Imagine walking around with gear like that.

Red stopped in the centre of the room. "She isn't home," he said. "I called her and there was no answer. I kept ringing and ringing." He shrugged wearily and sat down.

Jon, so aloof, so mystical, was frowning and holding the empty whisky bottle that he'd taken from the game-room. Frank noted without curiosity that it was a brand he had never bought. He wondered where the bottle had come from.

Sergeant chirped: "She was alone in there. She had a cup of tea. No indication of anything unusual. She merely wanted to be alone. I can understand that. Some people chatter and some people crave solitude. Now what?"

"The police," said Bill Rapier. "Isn't it customary to call in the police?"

"What for?" snapped Red.

Bill shrugged. "Unexplained disappearance."

"She ran away," said Red sharply. "She's playing a joke. She'll be home, waiting for me."

"Let's be realistic, Red," said Frank. "Do I call the police?"

Jon put down the whisky bottle. "There's no need for that," he declared. "Lola simply changed her mind."

Red leapt to his feet and bellowed out four words, in a dull, horrible slowness. It was as if he were stating a fact, and no one thought to question it. She'd been about to become Red's wife, and Red's wife wouldn't change her mind. Red simply didn't marry that sort of person. He wasn't treated that way, by anyone. There was only one thing that could possibly have happened to Red's wife, and he stated it in a drugged, hypnotic voice.

"She—had—an—accident."

Jon leaned forward, "But—" he began. Red whirled, grabbed the heavy boot and flung it in sudden anger.

Jon ducked and the boot crashed into the top of a book-case

and knocked over a vase. It fell and smashed to bits. Then Red strode to the table, picked up a bottle of Scotch and poured it into a tumbler. He filled it to the brim and held it up, high.

"This is a hell of a wedding," he cried, "but it's one time the groom has a right to get drunk."

He downed the contents of the tumbler without removing it from his lips.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was after midnight when Frank switched off the floodlight and watched the last car swing out of the driveway and turn north into Leather Man Road. The motor drummed out explosively as it took the hill. At the top it settled down to a low, steady drone that died slowly in the distance. A gust of wind brought a last growling note, and then the chorus of crickets took charge.

Something moved in the brush at the edge of the lawn. A tree-frog set up a frantic scream. Two glowing points of green light materialized under the vague shape of a deck-chair. Princess trotted across the grass and disappeared around the corner of the house, bound on important cat business. Frank stood lost in thought.

He wondered what they were saying inside the car that had just left. They'd be talking of him and of Lola, of Red and Kathy and how divorces never did work out. Frank had seen the hostility and the sharp, triumphant criticism in the faces of most of those guests who'd dropped in for the reception. They were mere acquaintances and they'd stayed to sightsee. They hadn't expected to be in on the juiciest happenings in the history of Shadow Hill.

Lola was dead. Frank had no conclusive evidence of the fact, but he assumed it. Leather Man Road, which meant a way of life, a love of gardens and dogs and friendship and putting, would go. The dozen or so houses, those quiet, protected houses which Frank had envied so much that first day he'd seen them, would vibrate with gossip and suspicion. The pleasant, casual, easy relationship of the road would be a thing of the past.

Frank had no illusions, but of all the things he expected to lose, there was only one that touched him. Alice. They'd had so little time together. They'd been so busy, so caught up in work that had to be done.

He'd met her at Red's, long ago, but at that time he'd been interested in Lola. Alice was just Red's kid sister, who watched everything with black, absorbed eyes. Frank had hardly thought of her until one day, shortly after he'd broken with Lola, when he'd

told Red he had to go down to Washington for a few days and might look up Sergeant.

"Alice's with him, too," Red had said, "and she's worth knowing. Take her out to dinner, Frank."

"She has a job there, hasn't she?"

"Social service work. She's with one of the local agencies and she's all wrapped up in it."

Frank had dropped in at the Penscotts' and found Sergeant on one of his rare nights off. They'd had dinner together, the three of them, and Sergeant had talked the whole evening. He'd been at his wittiest and his ebullience had blacked out both Alice and Frank. But when he returned to his hotel, he carried with him an impression of some inner, elusive loveliness. He kept seeing Alice's dark eyes and dramatic colouring and he wondered what manner of person she was.

The next evening he'd contrived to be near her office building around five, and he'd stood at the entrance and waited for her. As soon as he saw her he'd known it was a mistake. He'd read something into her that wasn't there. His illogical disappointment was in his voice and she'd sensed it. Over a drink she was withdrawn and embarrassed, and they both found it difficult to talk.

He'd insisted on taking her home. Sergeant had 'phoned that he was detained for dinner and Frank had had Alice on his hands for the evening. She'd been tired and he'd taken her to a movie and they'd had to stand in line. Somehow, everything went wrong.

It had been a month before he'd seen her again. And despite the fact that he was thirty-nine and she was twenty-two, despite the fact that he had nothing but a few hours of boredom to look back on, he couldn't push her out of his mind. He kept feeling that they'd missed something, but that it was there nevertheless. Her image both eluded him and never left him.

Something of that queer ambivalence had lasted throughout their courtship, and part of it still persisted. He loved her with a whole-hearted tenderness, but she was essentially a stranger to him.

He supposed that Lola had had something to do with it. She'd kept popping in on them and giving Alice the impression that Frank had to be divided between them. Alice could get so much of him, and no more.

Lola's congratulations had been typical. "Frank and I," she'd said, "are so glad."

"Where the hell do you get that stuff?" demanded Frank.

Lola had shrugged him off. "Oh, pooh!" she'd said.

Wearily, Frank turned his back on the crickets and went downstairs. The lights were on in the balcony alcove, and Alice and Sergeant were talking in low tones.

At sight of Frank, Sergeant said "Nightcap?" and without waiting for an answer jumped up to mix a drink. Alice smiled and made love to him with her lips.

Frank bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "Monkey," he said. She purred and murmured, "Baboon." Then he sat down in the big armchair and Sergeant handed him a glass.

"We've been talking about you," began Sergeant.

Frank sipped. "Nice things?"

"Alice's been defending you, but what I want to know is this: What are you hiding? What were you trying to put across this evening? You arranged a wedding and hired a minister and fixed the date and for all I know you decided when they were to have children and what schools they'd go to when they grew up. Who got married tonight? You or Red?"

"Nobody got married," said Frank, squinting over his drink. "I thought you knew."

"The point," said Sergeant irritably "is that you didn't intend anybody to get married. The point is that you rang in a phony. When this Marlowe didn't even speak to Lola before the ceremony and didn't fill out papers and ask for a marriage licence, I wasn't sure whether he was a dunce or a fake. So I looked him up in the 'phone book, and there's no Harry Marlowe in Yonkers, minister or otherwise. He's not even a plumber. I tried to question him and you spirited him off to the station. What's behind it, Frank?"

"If you want to know," said Frank, "I'll tell you. Gladly. Then, if the police get in on this and ask questions you'll have to lie and they'll know you're lying and you'll be in a hell of a mess. A congressional committee may even investigate you."

"That would be an honour," snapped Sergeant.

"So I thought I'd keep you out of it and you'd have clean hands and no worries and could sleep nights. Do you still want to know?"

Sergeant frowned and glanced at Alice. Alice said: "Frank, you know I'll lie for you. That's what I'm here for. That's what I married you for. To take a couple of troubles."

"She has a right to know," said Sergeant. "And if you think I'll sleep nights knowing you faked a minister and tried to palm him off as a Mohammedan with two wives, you're crazy. I'm so damned inquisitive I'll spend the night biting my nails and tearing the sheets into thin, symmetrical shreds. I love scandal. I love dirt. I love intrigue. Let's have it!"

"All right," said Frank. "I told you how the local clergy refused to marry a divorcé and the notorious Lola. I finally persuaded one of them, but at seven-thirty he called up and said his conscience bothered him and he couldn't go through with it.

"I was on the spot, so I got a friend. I was going to tell Red and Lola after the ceremony and they could have got married decently tomorrow. I merely didn't have the heart to call off a wedding after Alice had gone and bought a ten-buck wedding cake."

"Who is he?"

"That," said Frank, "is the sixty-four dollar question."

Sergeant grinned cheerfully and accepted defeat. "The next thing I want to know is where you were all evening. You came in about seven and told me you were sick, and then you disappeared completely until about nine-thirty. Where were you?"

"Sleeping." Frank turned to Alice. "The sun was a little too much for me, and so I slept it off."

"Where?" asked Sergeant.

"In bed, of course. In my room."

Sergeant leaned forward. His eager little blue eyes were bright. His high forehead was shiny and he spoke in a quick, triumphant manner. "You weren't! I went up there twice to see how you were getting along, and you weren't in your room!"

"That's right," said Frank. "I wasn't."

"Where were you?" persisted Sergeant.

"Father," said Alice, "Frank doesn't have to account to you or anyone else. He's tired and he hasn't been well, so let's drop it."

Sergeant shook his head doggedly. "No. This has to be settled right now, once and for all. Frank, did you kill her?"

"Father!" exclaimed Alice.

Sergeant didn't look at her. "Frank," he repeated sharply.
"Did you?"

"Yes."

Sergeant wiped his forehead and said, "Good God!" Then he stared open-mouthed, shook his head in bewilderment and gulped his drink. "How?" he finally jerked out.

"I strangled her."

"Why?"

"Father," said Alice, "the big lug's only joking. Can't you see that?"

Sergeant looked at her and at Frank, and then he leaned back and laughed. "Frank," he said, "you almost had me believing you. By gosh, you did give me a scare."

"Now that we're through with the nonsense," said Frank, "will you tell me what you have in mind?"

"Certainly. Frank, I'm absolutely convinced that the girl was murdered."

"How do you figure that?"

"Process of elimination. Did she change her mind and beat it? No, because her bridal bouquet was missing. Not a sign of it!" He leaned back and beamed with satisfaction. "Whether you're running around the countryside in a dither or eloping with the other man or just sneaking off to a railroad station in a funk, you don't carry a three-foot bouquet of flowers."

"Besides," added Alice, "she couldn't have walked through the living-room without being seen. And as for leaving via the outside—you have to scramble along the rocks and then go through all those thorns and brambles. And you know Lola."

"Check," said Frank. "What next, my venerable Sherlock?"

Sergeant leaned back complacently. "Next," he said, "suicide. She left no note and she showed no previous symptoms. No matter how wacky you are, you don't commit suicide without a train of causation. And you don't ask for a cup of tea an hour before you drown yourself—tea and all."

"That leaves murder and accident," said Frank. "Go ahead and eliminate the accident."

"That's the easiest of all. The door was closed. The door to the platform. Here we have a nice warm evening, gentle breezes and a

door that sticks and can't blow shut. If she stepped out for a moment she wouldn't close the door, would she?"

"Sorry," said Frank. "I'm not convinced."

"My boy," said Sergeant, "you don't have to be convinced. All you have to grasp is that there's enough evidence to bring the police around."

Frank laughed. "Sure. Good old Chief Charlie Ferret! He'll talk football and the American Legion, take a couple of cigars and go home."

"Maybe that's what he does when he's investigating a chicken thief, but this is murder. And remember—" he looked at Alice. "Frank is your husband and he faked a minister, and everybody knows he had a good, solid motive."

"You don't have to handle me with honey and almond lotion," remarked Alice. "I know all about Frank's affair with Lola. In fact, Lola and I were discussing it this evening."

"When you brought her the tea?" asked Frank.

Alice nodded. Then she rose, sat on the arm of Frank's chair and began rumpling his hair. "You knew I was lying, didn't you?" she asked.

Frank nodded. She kept playing with his hair and she said: "Silly. You're all worried up. Want to hear the truth?"

"Yes."

Alice's fingers stopped moving. "She accused me of disapproving of the marriage. She said I hated her and was jealous. I told her that was nonsense, that we were going to be neighbours and that I wanted to be friends with her. Then she turned around and looked at me. She was holding her saucer in one hand and her cup in her other, and she was about to sip. It was her grand manner. She held the tableau and raised her head and smiled.

"'Nevertheless,' she said, 'you wish I weren't marrying him, don't you? Be honest, Alice.' I said yes, and then she sipped the tea, put the cup and saucer down and said: 'Well, maybe I won't. I still have an hour in which to change my mind.'" Alice's fingers rumpled Frank's hair again. "And what do you think of that?"

"I don't know."

But Sergeant frowned. "Alice," he said, "why didn't you tell this before?"

"Mostly for Red's sake. I didn't want to humiliate him by implying he'd been jilted at the altar. You know Red's pride. And partly because I think Lola was trying to cover up."

Alice frowned. "I don't know. But all the time I was there, I had the funny feeling that she was putting on an act. And she was definitely drunk."

"Why an act?" demanded Sergeant. "For whose benefit?"

Frank thought of the skulking figure, and he kept his silence.

"I don't know," said Alice, standing up. "But I'm getting awfully tired. I think I'll go to bed." She bent down and kissed Frank on the ear.

"I'll be along soon," remarked Frank.

"All right. I'm going to look in on Kathy. She went up long ago and I want to see if she's asleep. Good night, Father."

"Night, Alice." Sergeant waved amiably. Alice's footsteps were absorbed by the carpeting of the stairs.

"Nice girl you married," declared Sergeant. "Frank, I hope you don't run into trouble. I hope Lola just changed her mind or got scared, but I don't think so."

"Neither do I. Let's forget it for a while, Sergeant. I'm getting groggy with it."

Sergeant rose and mixed himself another drink. "Sure," he said. "Let's talk about other things." He picked up the heavy, leather costume. "Who was this Leather Man guy, Frank? Outside of the fact that he gave you an interesting address."

"He's a local legend that piques my curiosity. He was a real person, too. Some of the oldsters around here still remember him. He used to travel through the district. A big, uncouth man with a beard, dressed entirely in that leather outfit. It weighed fifty or sixty pounds. More, with the boots."

"Mm. What was the idea? What did he do for a living?"

Frank smiled. "As far as I can make out, his business was being a legend. Just going around the district and looking queer. Sleeping in caves and talking gibberish. He died of cancer of the lip. That makes him real, doesn't it?"

"What did he eat? Where did he get his leather and how did he keep from freezing in the winter and what was his *raison d'être*? You can't earn a living at being a legend."

"He did. People gave him food and bits of old junk. Sometimes he paid for it and sometimes not. The only fact everyone seems agreed on is that he was French."

"Then why didn't he make himself a French legend?"

"Maybe he figured they had enough legends. He's supposed to have been in love with a girl who died just before they were to be married. One version is that he killed her accidentally. The more current one is that he took over her father's business and ran it into bankruptcy. The father was a leather merchant and the leather market collapsed, so the old man called off the wedding and put the girl in a convent. A few people have tried to trace down the Leather Man's name, in France, but it's no go. I don't believe the love affair business, anyhow. It's too pat."

"What do you believe?"

Frank lit a cigarette. "The guy interests me, Sergeant. Has from the first time I heard of him. I keep asking myself why—why? Why does a human being, who has only one life to live and can make it reasonably happy—why does he go and make a miserable monster of himself? Call him cracked, but that doesn't satisfy me. What cracked him?"

"You don't have to be a psychiatrist to answer that, do you?"

"No. He's an archetype, I guess. You find him under different names all over the world. A symbol of human guilt. In a way, he's atoning for my guilt. Whatever happened to Lola, I'm right there in the chain of causation. No matter how innocent I am, I'm guilty, too."

Sergeant was examining the costume again. "What are you going to do with it? Hang it on the wall and make it a museum piece? Then what? Mm. Hand-made all right, with leather thongs for stitching. You'd better oil the thing or it'll crack. Try it on, Frank."

Frank took off his coat and lifted the heavy, cumbersome jacket. Sergeant helped him slip into it.

"It's like armour," grunted Frank. "Can you imagine how the guy must have smelled after walking ten miles on a hot day?" He sat down and pulled on the big, stiff breeches. One thick boot was near by, the right one, but he didn't feel like going downstairs for

the other. Not just for a left-handed boot. "I crackle all over the place. Makes me feel like the Wizard of Oz." He stood up and muttered: "There! How do I look?"

"I'd hate to meet you in the dark. Take a look at yourself, Frank."

"Mirror's upstairs," said Frank. He trudged heavily, to a squeaking, straining accompaniment. He thought it strange that Alice didn't come out and investigate. He was better than a baboon now. He was practically an armadillo.

He heard the front door slam and he wondered whether he'd forgotten to close it. He tramped up another flight to the main entrance. He was sweating from the exertion and stepped outside for a breath of air.

He said "Hello?" softly and saw something move in the bushes. "Who's there?" he called. There was no answer.

He clanked forward like a tank, thinking that Kathy must have come out. He'd heard her slam the door and he'd caught a glimpse of her in the bushes. But why didn't she answer?

A figure popped up in front of him. It was too tall for Kathy, and Frank reached out. A fist bounced off his thick, leather garment and he struck back clumsily. He heard a gasping grunt. He charged forward, tripped over a root and stumbled awkwardly. The weight of the leather impeded his movements and he went crashing down. The shadowy figure scuttled off. For a brief, blurred instant Frank glimpsed the man, and for the second time that night he imagined and was not sure that he'd seen Arthur Blithe.

Frank picked himself up slowly. He could hardly move in this rig and there was no point in chasing into the woods. He turned cumbersomely and re-entered the house. This time he locked the door before clumping down the stairs.

Kathy's door was open and there was a light inside. Frank stepped into the doorway. Alice spun around and gave a cry of fright.

"Oh—Frank!" she exclaimed. "It's you! You scared me, at first."

Frank glanced from her to the bed. Kathy's night things were spread out, but the bed hadn't been slept in and Kathy hadn't undressed.

"You see?" said Alice. "I feel as if I were going mad. First Lola, and now Kathy!"

"Nonsense!" said Frank. "She went out for a walk. Couldn't sleep. I was just outside and saw her."

Alice breathed a sigh of relief. Frank wasn't sure why he lied, or even whether he did. More to comfort Alice than anything else, he supposed. For Alice's peace of mind, he was jeopardizing Kathy. For Alice. They had so little time left.

She rushed into his arms and nuzzled her cheek against his. He touched her face and felt the wetness. Then he put his arms around her as if he'd never let go.

She squirmed and said "Frank—Frank." He loosened his hold and she began giggling. "Frank!" she repeated.

"Pull yourself together," he said. "I know it's tough, but—please!"

She stopped laughing and wiped at her tears. "I'm not hysterical, darling. Really I'm not. It's just that leather outfit."

"Sergeant asked me to put it on. He wanted to see. Is it so damn' funny?"

"No, Frank. It's just that the leather—somehow, it tickles!" Her eyes, shy, black, mysterious, seemed to offer up the very essence of her soul.

If he'd killed Lola, for this moment at least he was glad of it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALL through that long, impossible evening, Jon Sebastian Block had felt acutely uncomfortable and borne the weight of a great rending sadness that encompassed the entire world. He'd been sorry for the guests because they were such little people, buzzing so excitedly in the presence of a scandal. He'd been sorry for Frank and Alice and Kathy, but most of all he'd been sorry for Red Kerrigan. Because Red, of all people, did not deserve this.

Jon yearned to speak out and bring order into the confusion around him, but a solemn promise held him silent and he stood aloof. His eyes, dark grey, shadowy, mild, held an extraordinary clarity. His nose was long and thin, like his hands, like his feet and his arms and his legs. All of him was long and thin and yet powerful, like a machine with unusually great leverage. At first you didn't notice this strength of his. Then gradually, beyond the appearance of the man, beyond his scraggy moustache and his scraggy hair that was always in need of cutting, beyond the soft affability of him, you became aware of a force that was inherently violent. Detached, immovable and violent. It was the fury of a creative artist, the obstinacy of a man with a vision.

That strange power shone through him, and often he felt it as an urge that he had to repress. He towered, and he had no wish to tower. In Frank he seemed to find an answering strength, though of a different kind, and shortly before the ceremony had started, Jon almost told Frank. Then the minister arrived and Jon was saved. And again, when Mathilda sent her music booming forth from the piano and Jon alone knew that there would be no wedding, he wanted to rise up and shout.

The words were on his lips when he chanced to look at Alice. She was so quiet, so sweet and subdued and so trusting in her proximity to Frank, that Jon could not bear to break her mood. She seemed to give him a new fortitude, and he kept gazing at her. She was a symbol of the peace and the beauty that dwelt on the earth. And growing aware that she held it, this peculiar quality, and

that she was an unlimited source of it and would always give to Frank and yet have enough left over for others—seeing it in her, Jon felt a tremendous flash that lit up his whole being.

Later, he met Alice on the stairs and he wanted to tell her of his feeling, but there were no words. He wanted to kiss her in token of his humility, but instead he seized her hand, gripped it impulsively and then tore himself away without uttering a single word. He was certain she understood, and he felt strangely happy. The happiness almost wiped away the guilt of his silence.

Presently, tiring of the mob, Jon wandered upstairs and stepped out of the house. Three or four cars were crowded into the driveway and one of them was trying to edge out to the road. He turned away and looked upward, through the leafy mass of the great elm tree. He could see a patch of dark sky and the gleam of two or three stars. He took a great breath that seemed to make him one with the whole universe. This air that he took in was the same air that filled and supported every living creature on earth. Through the simple act of breathing he became one with them, he married all of humanity and made them his.

Then he heard voices from the house. Red's drunken mumbling, Sergeant Penscott's nervous, anxious voice, Bill Rapier's sharp, impatient urging. The door opened and Red erupted into the driveway and waved his arms.

"Under the spreading chestnut tree," he declaimed, and then he frowned and looked up at the sky. "Where's the chestnut?" he demanded. "Where in hell'd the chestnut go? The good old chestnut ain't there. Stars, Stars, And all eyes else dead coals. Bend low O dusty night, Give back my lost delight!"

The effort of looking up unbalanced him and he almost fell. Bill caught him under the arm and little Penscott nipped at him with a stream of questions. "What's the night got to do with it? Pull yourself together, Red. Can you walk home? Want a car? Want Bill and me to help?"

Red swung around. "Past hope, past cure, past help!" he intoned. He belched suddenly and began laughing.

Jon approached and said "Hello, Red." Red stared at him in bleary-eyed astonishment.

"Jon," he said. "Good old Jon. Jon the Baptist. Lives all alone

in the wilderness. Me too, Jon. All alone now, just like you." He lurched and Jon caught him.

"Steady, Red."

Red put his arm around Jon. "I'm drunk, Jon. Ever get drunk?"

"No."

Red tittered. "Don't tell anybody, Jon, but I'm drunk. You take me home, huh? You take me, and let Bill come along for a spare, case you get tired. Trouble is, I'm drunk and I don't want the Sergeant to know it. Don't tell him, Jon. He's my step-father and I love him. Always asking questions and I love him anyhow. If you see him, you pretend you're sober. Good old Jon—I'm gonna look out for you."

Sergeant said: "The air will do him good. Think he can walk it?"

"Can walk anywhere. Can walk all the way to New York. I'm a hiker. I'm the best damn' hiker on Leather Man Road; 'cept you, Jon. You're a good hiker, too." He wobbled forward. "Bill's a good hiker, too. Black market Bill. Buys all his shoes without coupons. You need shoes, Jon?"

"Thanks," said Jon. "You gave me one before."

Red hooked his arm in Jon's and started off meekly, with Bill in his wake.

"I didn't behave right," said Red. "Threw a shoe at you, Jon. Didn't hurt you, did I?"

"You missed me. All you got was a vase."

"What kind of a vase?"

"China."

"I don't like china. Breaks too easy. We oughta have things that don't break. What's the sense of having things that break all the time?" He stopped again and looked around vacantly. "Where's Lola?" he said. "Lola ought to come along, too."

"Lola's gone," said Rapier.

Red laughed. "Oh, there you are." He tried to ruffle Rapier's thick, curly hair, but Rapier ducked. Red hooked Rapier's arm and said: "Come on, Lola. Got to go home. What did you run away for?"

Rapier pulled loose and snarled suddenly, "Who in hell would

want to marry you?" He stood stiffly, stocky legs braced, like a fighter trying to last just one more round.

Red put his arm around Rapier's shoulder. "Lots of people. Everybody in the world wants to marry me. Everybody except you, Lola." He walked on for a few feet and then exclaimed: "Lola, you're a skunk. Break up my home and then run out on me. I ought to sock you. Jon, will I sock her?"

"No," said Jon.

"Good old Jon," said Red, "I like you. Want to hear a secret?"

"Better wait till morning."

Red shook his head stubbornly. "I'm gonna tell this one. Jon, you're the best damn' guy on Leather Man Road. I like you, Jon. Where'd Lola go?"

They had reached the top of the hill and were crossing the broad lawn that sloped upwards to Red's house. It was white with a green roof and heavy green blinds, but now, at night, you saw only the whiteness of the shingles and the dark blobs of the shutters, and the clean, simple lines that had stood unchanged for the last century and a half.

Red stopped in front of the porch steps. "Think you can make it?" he asked.

"Come on," said Rapier impatiently.

Red lurched forward and then, deliberately, Bill Rapier put out his foot and shoved. Red stumbled and Jon spun around to break the fall. He had an awkward grip and he dropped to one knee and then let Red sag down.

Rapier muttered sullenly, "He's out cold." He hooked one arm and he and Jon hoisted Red to his feet. They half carried, half dragged him up the stairs to his bedroom, and there Red flopped down and closed his eyes.

"Come on," said Rapier. "We got him here. Let's go."

"Have to undress him first."

Rapier shrugged. "We're not nursemaids. We should have dumped him on the floor and left him." Jon leaned forward and began unlacing Red's shoes. Presently Bill Rapier bent down and helped.

When they were downstairs and had closed the front door behind them Jon said abruptly, "Why did you trip him, Bill?"

It was too dark to see whether there was any expression on Rapier's broad, chubby face. He hesitated a moment and then replied, "I didn't trip him."

"You shouldn't have done it," said Jon. "He's had trouble enough this evening."

"He doesn't know what trouble is—yet."

"We'll have to help him, all of us. He ought not to be alone. Meet me up here tomorrow, Bill. Say in the afternoon?"

"Don't play the saint," said Bill rudely. "The role doesn't fit you." He turned on his heel and marched off.

Jon listened to Rapier's footsteps grow fainter and disappear. He hadn't known that Rapier disliked Red. He hadn't known that there were any dislikes in the community. Except Arthur Blithe's grudge against Red. But Jon had never been able to understand the Blithes. He remembered the afternoon, about a year ago, when Lola had dropped in and said she hoped he didn't mind her coming alone. Jon had been flabbergasted and her question had put him ill at ease. Why should he be angry when she was amiable enough to pay him a visit?

He hadn't known what to answer. He'd stared reflectively, wondering why she was wearing that green and red peasant dress with the embroidered apron. She, who claimed to hate all things peasantry, was here in Tyrolean costume.

She'd asked him almost at once to do her portrait, and he'd refused. "I'm afraid you're not a good model for me," he'd said. "You're too strong, too splendidly alive."

"An artist should paint life. Dead things aren't worth the price of the paint you use."

"Of course not. What I meant was that an artist should sublimate and distil his emotions until they're aesthetically pure. I couldn't paint you that way."

"You mean like him?" she'd said, and she'd pointed to the gigantic head of Jefferson that dominated the whole studio. Jon had done it from a rare old print and it had none of the idealized perfection of most portraits. And yet, in its quietness and purity, it was a super-idealization. The sadness of the eyes and mouth, the strength of the huge blocks of nose and cheek gave the effect he wanted. He'd cut the head off below the hairline and above the

chin. There were eyes, nose, mouth and the planes of the cheek. Nothing more.

"Yes, like that," he'd said. It was the best thing he'd ever done and he looked at it frequently, torn between pride and a need to do away with it, to paint it out and use the canvas for something else. For the canvas contained too large a part of his own self.

He had tried haltingly, through the Jefferson portrait, to explain his ideas and why they prevented him from painting her. Lola had laughed and said, "Jon, either you don't like me or you don't know me," and then she'd crossed the room and taken his hand and said, "You're nice. You're sweet." She'd stood there with her large eyes fixed on him and there had been a melting quality in her. She'd been wanting him to make love, and though he desired her, he turned away brusquely. He didn't want to poach on Frank's girl and he didn't want the turmoil of an affair with someone who lived down the road.

He supposed that was why Lola had avoided him thereafter.

Slowly, Jon walked back to his home. It had once been an ice-house, and he had tacked on a tiny outbuilding to serve as kitchen. He had done most of the construction work himself. He had merely had to clean up, build a floor and a great stone fireplace and add the balcony on which he slept. He had left the old, mellowed studs, but he had lined the roof with wallboard and painted it blue. People thought he'd done it so that he could look up and pretend he was seeing the sky, but that would have been false and unthinkable. The ceiling was blue because Jon liked it blue, and because it gave him the best light for painting.

As he turned into the pathway that led to the house he heard Picasso, the setter, barking. Jon smiled. He'd had to lock Picasso in because Picasso hadn't been invited to the wedding. He'd explained it carefully to the dog before he'd left, and Picasso had listened a little sadly, with his long ears drooping and his long, thin tongue hanging from his open mouth and his soft, dark eyes fixed on Jon in the effort to understand.

When he opened the door the dog leapt at him in an ecstasy of excitement and tried to lick his face, and Jon had to push him down. "You never will learn manners, will you?" he said. "Here I have my

best clothes on and look what you've done to them already. Just look. Picasso Block, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

The dog sat back on his haunches and threshed his tail slowly. As soon as Jon had changed to disreputable overalls, the dog came at him again in a fury of affection. Then Jon let him outside.

Alone, he sat down in the only comfortable chair he had and lit his pipe. Presently he noticed that the whisky was gone. He was certain, then, that the empty bottle he'd found at Frank's and had later thrown into the bushes had come from here.

Jon shook his head. A whole bottle was an awful lot to drink. He wondered whether he'd done right in not speaking. When he'd promised not to, he'd had no idea of what would happen. He frowned, thinking of the worry and uncertainty of the evening. He could have resolved it so easily. But—a promise was a promise.

He relit his pipe and stared at Alice's picture. There was a calm, serene quality to it, a suggestion of moonlight in the pale silverish streaking that blended into the dark background. He wondered now what he had meant by it, why he had painted it that way, and it seemed to him that Alice had a mystical quality of goodness and nobility and purity which shone forth and set her apart from everyone else in the world.

He heard Picasso bark outside and he looked at the big plate-glass window. All he saw was his own reflection. The lamp, the chair, the table with some fruit on it. He studied a composition and then looked at the portrait again.

Someone knocked faintly, and Picasso barked. Jon called out. The door opened slowly and Kathy was standing there, timid and unsure of herself.

Jon rose and said gently: "This is nice of you, Kathy. Come in."

She shook her head. "I didn't know where to go. I couldn't stay at the Danzigs'. After what happened, I just couldn't. And I didn't dare go to Red's."

"Of course," he said. "Where else would you go? Sit down, Kathy."

She dropped wearily into a chair and rubbed her forehead, the pale, wan forehead with the delicate skin. "You took Red home," she said. "How is he?"

"Asleep."

"Yes. He was very drunk, wasn't he? He should never take more than one drink. I used to mix his separately and put in just a taste of whisky. But I couldn't do it tonight, could I? I can't do it for him ever again."

"I don't know, Kathy. All I know is that you were good for him and Lola wasn't. He should never have thought of marrying her. It was all wrong."

"How do you know?"

"I had a dream about them, the other night. I got up and tried to paint it and it came out ugly. That isn't a reason, is it? But it sticks in my mind."

"I dreamt about them, too. Horrible dreams. Night after night. That's why I'm afraid to go to sleep. I'll dream about them, and it will be even worse." She rubbed her forehead. "I'd better go now."

"No—stay here," said Jon. "I'll go outside somewhere, and you can have the house to yourself."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that! I'll leave soon." She tried to smile, and her lips trembled and a shudder shook her frame.

"You're cold," said Jon. "I'll make a fire and brew some tea. Then I'll go."

"No—please stay! I'd be afraid, all alone. Maybe you could let me curl up on the couch. That's all I want. Really it is. And I am cold."

Jon stooped in front of the hearth and built the fire. Outside, he heard Picasso bark excitedly. Jon wondered whether he was going to have more visitors.

He touched off the fire and then gave Kathy a blanket and put the tea on. When he came back she was huddled in the chair and staring at the fire. She didn't look up. She spoke as if to herself, and if she hadn't used his name Jon would have thought she'd forgotten he was there.

"Jon," she said. "I love him. I can't tear out my whole heart and keep on living, can I? If he were going to be happy—if there'd ever been a chance of his being happy with her, I wouldn't have minded so much. But this way—it's all so wrong."

Jon handed her the tea. "Drink this," he said, and then he sat down again and watched her.

She took a few sips and put the saucer down. "I hope she's dead!" she exclaimed. "I hope I never see her again."

Jon looked at his watch. It was two o'clock. In time, he'd have to tell, but not yet. He listened for Picasso's bark.

"Lola isn't dead," he said.

Kathy looked up in terror. "How do you know?"

"I know what she did and where she went. I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you, but I can't say anything until I hear from her."

He approached Kathy and gazed down at her sadly, his heart filled with pity. Suddenly she burst into tears.

Jon started to put his hand on her shoulder, but he refrained. Poor little Kathy! She couldn't understand why Red had cast her off. She'd been used to love and tenderness and consideration. Those were the qualities of which she was made, and she saw them in all people. In Red. And when tenderness and affection disappeared, the world became incomprehensible. She wanted to hide under a chair, like a cat, and not emerge until her world was safe and loving again.

After a while she raised her head. "Forgive me for being such a nuisance, Jon, but I was thinking of Red. He's been so humiliated."

"Perhaps," said Jon, "he'll come back to you."

Kathy shook her head. "No. I don't exist for him any more. I never will. If I had, he never could have sent me away like that. And with Lola to take charge. It was like being a prisoner and having her for jailer. That's what I minded so much. The dishonesty. The shame."

"But I thought you were such good friends. Your letters—"

"I couldn't let anybody know how I really felt. I'd rather have died."

"You mean—you weren't really friends?"

"Oh, I suppose we were," said Kathy. "We lived together. We shopped. Lola had to buy her trousseau and I helped her select her wedding dress. It was a grey suit, because they were going to get married at noon and leave immediately. That was the original plan. Lola couldn't find a blouse the colour she wanted, so I suggested she buy the material and we make it together. I found the pattern

and I stood in front of the mirror and modelled it for her. We talked about Red and what kind of a husband he was. I told her what he liked for breakfast and how she mustn't let him drink too much. And all the time I knew she was in love with someone else."

"With whom?"

"With Frank, or Walter Ames. I used to wonder which. You see, she was corresponding with Walter. She used to get letters from him almost every day. He was mad about her. She told me she'd almost married him and that maybe she'd made a mistake in not doing so. She used to ask me whether I thought she could be in love with two men. She spoke as if she meant Walter and Red, but she didn't. She was thinking of Walter and Frank, and I knew it."

"Then why did she want to marry Red?"

"Because he had money and lived in a fine white house. And because Ames was in the army, with a private's pay, and she thought he'd probably get killed and she didn't want to be a war widow."

"She told you that?"

"Yes. I used to look at her and wonder how she could do it, and why I was meekly divorcing Red so that she could ruin him. I hated myself. Jon, you don't know what it is to wake up every morning and be ashamed of yourself, and then have to pretend you like someone you hate, and then go through the whole day pretending and not having the strength to say what you really think, because that wouldn't be fair to Red. He's so big and warm and impulsive, and if he was making a mistake it was an honest one, and it was what he wanted. I'd rather lose him, I'd so much rather, than live with him and make him unhappy."

Jon walked to the window and looked outside. His eyes were moist and he didn't want Kathy to see. He wanted to give her strength and faith, but there was nothing he could present to her and say, "Look, this is good." For Kathy's world was broken and there was nothing lovely in it except herself. He'd always conceived of people as honest and good and clean, and Lola was none of those things. He'd kept her secret tonight because he'd thought she was in love and that love was the only thing that mattered.

But she'd fooled him. He didn't understand. No one could be treacherous to his own feelings. But Lola was, and it killed every

belief Jon had ever nurtured. People couldn't be like that, and Lola was. And if Lola was, then everyone was, for all people were alike and contained the same flesh and the same spirit.

He turned round and looked at the portrait of Alice. Alice and Lola. Could there be two people made of such different stuff?

He didn't know and he couldn't figure it out.

He glanced towards Kathy and smiled. She was nodding in her chair, but she came awake with a start and rubbed at her forehead.

"Kathy," he said, "you're tired. Better go to sleep."

She nodded meekly. "Yes. I don't know what I'm saying any more. I'm just going to close my eyes. I don't have to undress or anything, do I? And I'll be so safe. In a way, I'll have Red with me again. I haven't felt so calm and safe since I left him. It's something you've done to me. Good night, Jon. Good night."

She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes, and by the time Jon had gone to the door and let Picasso in, she was asleep. He lifted her tenderly and carried her to the couch, and then he tucked her in like a child.

Picasso watched silently. Jon turned to the dog. "Take care of her, Picasso."

Picasso wagged his tail and Jon pushed him down, and when Picasso started to get up, Jon said "No," sharply, and Picasso stretched out at the foot of the couch. His great red head lay flat on the floor and his long ears twitched, but his eyes stayed open. Calm, gentle, wakeful eyes, intent on a spider.

Then Jon went upstairs and prepared for bed. He dozed fitfully for a while. When he heard a sound, he got up and glanced over the balcony. Kathy had spoken and reached out in her dreams. She was confused, and she murmured "Red—Red," and her fingers touched the great head of the dog and stroked his fur, and perhaps she was happy.

Jon wondered. Surely, he thought, the world wasn't like this. There had to be truth, and yet all that he had seen and heard last night was false and wrong and unreal.

He thought again of Lola. Jon had never understood her. He loved all human beings and had felt that everything which lived was good. The core of living was good, and if it was overlaid with evil, you could peel off the evil and the core was always there. Now

he was forced to fit Lola into his scheme of goodness, and she didn't fit. He tried to find some explanation that would account for her actions on a basis of goodness and the infinity of love, and he couldn't. He kept wondering, for if he admitted disillusion in her case, he had to admit the same disillusion in the case of every other human being. For people and life were one. Of that he was certain. It was the basis of his art and it was the reason why life was lived. But Lola . . .

He shook his head. And then he said, slowly and softly but quite audibly, "May her soul rot!" And for the rest of the night, he was sleepless.

CHAPTER NINE

IN the morning, Frank called the police.

He slipped out of bed quietly. Alice was lying on her side. Her black hair was rumpled and her long lashes were closed and her nose was small and pointed. She slept so peacefully that she was surely dreaming of ordinary simple things. Of the other evening when she'd bought a steak and they'd cooked it outside, just the two of them. Of a sea shell she'd found on the beach, years and years ago. Of a blue dress she'd worn when she was a child.

He tiptoed to the mirror and studied himself, the strong cheerful features, the lopsided ears, the clear, steady eyes. At least Alice would never know from looking at him.

Then he made his 'phone call.

She was still sleeping when he returned and he stepped into the bathroom and closed the door noiselessly. He had lathered his face and was picking up his razor when he heard a rustling sound and a light plop on the window ledge.

It was Princess. She was sitting in her usual place, where she watched him every morning, and she was as absorbed and attentive as a student attending a lecture. Her tail was curled daintily around her and her large yellow eyes were fixed upon Frank.

She meeowed softly and he lifted the screen to let her in. She made straight for the toilet, steadied her forefeet on the edge of the bowl and, in a feat of balance, put her head down and drank. As far as Frank had been able to ascertain, she never drank from any other place.

When she had finished she crouched underneath the window and looked up. Her whole body quivered as she aimed herself. Then she jumped, landed lightly on the sill and waited for the entertainment to proceed.

Frank didn't think it was cute. But for Princess and her leap in the dark, he wouldn't have been in this mess. Even though Lola hadn't appeared at the wedding, his conscience would have been clear. That conscience of his which wasn't a bit like a tin roof. Because . . .

He saw how obvious it all was. His affair with Lola, which people believed had never ended. His presence on the balcony. The loose flower-box. The fact that he'd pushed it and that he'd loosened the fastenings a couple of days before. "Previously prepared," were the words the police could use. And that meant murder. Even a blind man could see it.

With cold, penetrating logic, Frank presented the case as a police-officer might see it. "Danzig, you had an affair with Lola and it never ended satisfactorily. You never intended her to get married to anyone else. That's why you called in a fake minister. You were still involved with her. In fact, you . . ."

Frank stared at his razor and remembered the loan. Before Lola had gone to Reno he'd offered her money. Just in case. He knew she was always short of cash and she'd said she could use a couple of hundred, until she was married. When the police went over Frank's cheques and found the one made out to Lola . . .

"As a matter of fact," the police-officer would say, "you were paying her blackmail, weren't you? You don't give an ex-mistress two hundred dollars just for the fun of it."

But that was precisely what Frank had done. For the fun of it. So that he could kid Red. "Sure. But when your wife wanted to buy a hamburger in Reno, who financed her? Me!" That was all there was to it. That, and a touch of good will. The desire to spare Red the embarrassment of having Lola ask him for money. So . . .

"You killed her because you didn't want to keep on paying blackmail. She was marrying your best friend and she'd be living almost in your front yard. There were plenty of things she could have told your wife that you didn't want her to know. There always are.

"You knew Lola would be in the game-room, didn't you? And you knew no one could possibly be in the room above, because usually you kept it locked. But that night you didn't. You wanted everything ready. A couple of days before, you loosened the flower-box. You left it propped up and balanced on a two by four, but you fixed it so that all you had to do was move that one support. Then—bang! And she couldn't swim. You knew that, too.

"You lied about where you were. You told Penscott you were in your room, but you weren't. You gave him a cock-and-bull story

about a sunstroke. A few hours before you told the mason that you were used to the sun and it never affected you. A couple of hours before the wedding you told Kerrigan you felt fine. You told your wife the same thing when you came in the house. But when you saw Penscott you told him you had a sunstroke.

"You were in the room a couple of hours. Why? Because you had to wait until you were sure Lola was alone. You couldn't take chances on that. And when you were sure you stepped to the balcony and called her. You told her to close the door. The radio playing, the sound of the water and the closed door—you figured you were safe. Nobody would hear. So you called her, and then, when she was there in the right spot, you pushed the flower-box. Easy, wasn't it?

"And if I need any more proof, here it is. You claim the thing fell by accident. If it did, then tell us why you didn't yell for help. That's what an innocent man would do, every time. When there's an accident he calls for help. When he doesn't—that's murder."

Frank looked at the cat. "You," he said. Then he drew the razor down his cheek. His hand was steady.

In a way, he felt better. He knew exactly what he was up against and it justified his conduct last night. If he'd called for help on the slim chance that Lola could still be revived, the police would have checked his story and he'd have spent the night in jail.

He wished he knew whether the thing had hit her. He kept remembering the figure he'd seen clambering up the ravine. Had he killed Lola? And who was he and what motive could he have and where was he now and why didn't he speak out?

Frank wiped his razor. He wondered how a jury would look at it, provided they believed the true facts. Which they never would, of course. But if . . .

Frank had tried to save a cat, and had killed a woman. If he was responsible, it was purely an accident. Then why worry?

He wiped his razor. "Hello, Kitten," he whispered. The cat stared gravely, with unblinking eyes. Frank stared back and envied Princess from the bottom of his soul.

Princess kills a mouse, licks her paws and goes about the business of hunting the next one. The mice have done her no harm. She kills because she kills. Not for food, but to maintain the

continuity of her species. Frank kills for a reason; his conscience strikes back, and for the rest of his days it holds him screaming.

He put away the razor. Princess watched with wide, yellow eyes. Suddenly Frank wanted to fling her across the room and destroy her like his conscience.

He was sweating coldly. The trouble was that he lived in doubt. If he could only find out the truth. If there were a means of learning. He wouldn't need the kind of evidence that the police would go after. In a way, he wouldn't even need proof. Just a sign of some sort, just an instant's perception. That would be enough. A look of fear in someone's eyes, a slip of the tongue. Something so trivial that it would be lost to anyone else. But to Frank it would mean evidence of guilt, and the freeing of his own conscience.

He returned to the bedroom. Alice was awake and she called to him.

"Frank, I didn't hear you get up. What time is it?"

"A little after eight."

"Any news of Lola?"

"Not yet. But I called the police. They ought to be here pretty soon."

She sat up in bed. "Then I'd better get up. Why didn't you wake me before?"

"You looked too beautiful. And I'll handle the police, Alice. You don't have to bother."

"Bother? I'm dying to be in on it. You wouldn't really keep me out, would you?" She slipped out of bed, walked over to him and put her arms around him.

"Hello, Frank."

"Hello, Alice."

"Frank, who was the minister last night?"

"Harry Marlowe."

"Your assistant! Gosh, you are in a spot!"

He nodded. "And what's more, Monkey, it's my own private spot, so don't crowd in on it."

She gave him a fond, pitying look and ran into the bathroom.

Frank went upstairs and put on the coffee. He wanted to be eating breakfast when the police came. He'd say: "Have a cup of coffee? Sit down and be comfortable. I'll try to give you the dope,

and then you can fire questions at me. My wife will be here in a few minutes. Put on a good act for her, huh? After all, she's never seen the police work."

He had no fear of them. Charlie Ferret was big, capable and aggressive. He'd played professional football in the old days, before the game acquired its ballyhoo, and his playing days had brought him nothing. First because he'd been ten years too early, and second because he'd played the wrong position. Just a guard. The man who was down there at the bottom of the pile, who made the anonymous tackles and an occasional anonymous block.

Ferret wore clothes with a dash, and you'd take him for an ex-athlete who'd made sports headlines in his college days and was now a minor executive with one of the big corporations. And yet he was just a small-town cop, whose business was chicken thieves and minor accidents and occasional paper work.

Once he'd caught three notorious racketeers in a stolen car from the Bronx. They hadn't known he was a cop. They'd stopped in Shadow Hill for something to eat, and as they were piling into their car they'd called to him. "Hey, you—how do we get to the highway?" And he'd walked over and seen what anyone else would have seen. Three mean-looking men, with shifty eyes and police records stamped across their faces.

He'd said: "I'm going that way myself. Just follow along and I'll show you the short cut." He'd taken the dirt road that came into the parkway right where the state police sub-station was located, and there he'd stopped, blocking the narrow road, and he'd signalled the troopers.

That was all there'd been to it. But the trio turned out to be wanted for a notorious kidnapping and so Charlie had his name in papers all over the country, slightly mis-spelled and with the facts garbled, but in print nevertheless. And ever after he was introduced as the man who broke the Caxton case.

As for Eddy Christopher, he was a part-time cop and Ferret's assistant. A gentler and more doleful cop you never saw. He liked best to stand at the school crossing and hold up traffic while the children crossed the street. He particularly enjoyed stopping the big, expensive cars, and if he could do it for the sake of one small child, he felt happy the rest of the day.

In his off hours, Eddy was a carpenter. He was not particularly fond of carpentering, but he could work on his own time and not let his job interfere with police duties. He was so obviously a gentle soul that newcomers wondered why he had ever chosen police work, or why, having chosen it, the town tolerated his strange hobby.

The answer was his memory. He never forgot face, fact or figure. Whatever passed into the range of his observation stayed with him. Let a stranger come into town, and if Eddy saw him, he'd know him the rest of his life. He was a human filing cabinet, ready to produce the features of every wanted man and the licence numbers of every stolen car. The trouble was that no wanted men or stolen cars ever found their way to Shadow Hill. The only time they had, luck had brought them to Chief Ferret instead of to the infallible Eddy.

Thus the sad, gentle lugubrious Eddy followed the Chief of Police like the man Friday. As for Charlie, besides the affection he felt for his quiet assistant, Eddy's existence and uniform were absolutely essential to Ferret. For, without an assistant, Ferret would have been merely the town cop. With Eddy, Ferret had a police force and became the chief.

Frank heard the car at the same time that Alice came upstairs. He waited serenely until the front door opened.

Ferret marched in like the Chairman of the Board arriving at a directors' meeting. He said "Hello, Frank," and Frank said "Hello, Charlie. Hello, Eddy," and then Alice said: "I'll get some coffee. Sit down, but don't start until I get back. I want to hear all about it."

Charlie Ferret rubbed his hands and laughed. "Now ain't that just like a woman? She knows all about it, and she wants to sit down and have *me* tell *her*. As a matter of fact, I didn't hear a damn' thing until this morning. Nobody thought to call me up. What the hell was wrong, Frank? I thought you'd have sense enough to call me the minute it happened."

Frank shrugged. "The trouble was we didn't know whether anything had happened. In fact, we don't know yet."

"She disappears on her wedding night, and you don't think anything of it?"

"You know Lola," said Frank. "Maybe she just wanted to create a sensation. Maybe she wanted to make sure Red loved her,

and now she's sore because he got drunk instead. Nobody felt like making a tragedy out of an example of temperament."

"Tell me what happened," said Ferret.

Alice brought in the coffee. Frank said: "There isn't much. Lola was in the game-room, downstairs, and presumably she was dressing. Kathy knocked on the door a couple of times and Lola said she wanted to be alone. Alice brought her a cup of tea, around nine I guess.

"Mathilda Sir was all set to play the Wedding March. Red and his father and the minister were up at the altar. Kathy had gone in for Lola. There was a slight delay, and Alice told Mathilda to play something. She did. Then she saw the door open and she shifted to the Wedding March. Kathy screamed that Lola wasn't there, and the meeting broke up. That's all. No trace of the bride."

Ferret sipped his coffee and Eddy Christopher studied the cork mats on the table. The 'phone rang. Frank stared at Alice and waited for her to get up. She hesitated, as if she were afraid she'd miss something. Then, with a little shrug of resignation, she rose and marched out to the 'phone. She slammed the door behind her.

"Where's the game-room?" asked Ferret abruptly.

"Downstairs," answered Frank.

Ferret pushed back his chair and climbed to his feet. "Better show me," he said.

Alice was just putting down the 'phone as Frank and the pair of policemen came out of the dining-room. Frank led the way down the three flights of stairs, down past the door to Lola's room, down past the balcony with the leather clothes lying where he'd left them last night, down the spiral steps to the living-room.

Alice, who had followed, said quickly: "It's such a mess. There were so many people here last night. I haven't had time to clean up." She glanced with distaste at the cigarette butts piled in the ash-trays, at the ashes scattered on the floor, at the disordered chairs and the rumpled rugs.

Ferret noticed the shards of the broken china vase. "What's that?" he demanded.

"Red got drunk and threw the boot." Frank looked for it next to the bookcase, where it had landed. The boot wasn't there. He

turned in puzzlement and spotted it near the door, where it belonged. "That one," he said. "He got sore at the suggestion Lola had run out on him. The boot missed and knocked over a vase."

"Mm," said Ferret. "Looks like Red's pretty sensitive."

Frank didn't answer. Eddy smiled apologetically. Alice had a tight expression at the corners of her mouth. She'd have that expression often in the next few days.

"There's the game-room," remarked Frank. "Up those three steps."

He and Alice watched the two policemen enter the oval room. Frank took Alice's hand.

"Who 'phoned before?" he asked.

"Jon. He said Kathy had spent the night at his place. She'd wandered in there and was just too exhausted to come back. So she stayed. He was afraid we might worry. She'll be here soon."

Frank smiled. He wondered how he could have forgotten about Kathy. He'd been too engrossed in his own problems, he supposed. And in not bothering Alice. Alice was the only one who counted. There was no one else.

"Look," he said. "How are you going to get all of this cleaned up? Beatrice doesn't come Saturdays, does she?"

"I thought I'd call up the camp and see if any of the girls could come over."

"For a liberal, you have the damnedest ways of exploiting labour."

"They love it," said Alice. "I pay them and give them sodas on the way back. But they just love being in the house. They'd do it for nothing, if I asked."

Eddy appeared at the door. "Where's the tea-cup?" he asked with bashful mildness.

"Upstairs. I waited while Lola drank it, and then I took it back to the kitchen." Alice looked uncertain. "She had a biscuit, too."

"Where?"

"At the card-table. I'll show you." This time Frank went in. He caught Charlie Ferret's eye and Ferret winked. Ferret evidently felt sorry for anyone who had to live in a house like this.

Eddy was on his hands and knees, searching underneath the

card-table. When he got up, he seemed satisfied. "Crumbs," he said. "Always crumbs when you eat a cracker."

Ferret twisted his lips. "Was the door open?" He indicated the french doors that led to the platform.

"No," said Frank. "That was the peculiar thing."

"Why peculiar?"

"Well," answered Frank, telling himself he ought not to volunteer information, "last night we all assumed that if she'd stepped out for a breath of air, she'd have left the doors open. And if she had, they'd have stayed that way. They stick, from the dampness."

"A hell of a place for a house," said Ferret. "Some day these foundations are going to wash right out."

He put his shoulder against the door and shoved. The rushing sound of water seemed to pour into the room. Frank could see the black fury of the millstream racing past.

"How deep is this thing?" called Ferret.

"About ten feet, for the length of the ravine. Then it goes underground."

Ferret stepped to the edge of the platform and stared up at the balcony of Lola's room. He stroked his chin, made a clucking sound and motioned to Eddy. Eddy stepped to the side of his chief and for a few moments they spoke in low tones. Then Eddy pointed to something on the ground.

A few chips of stone that had come unmistakably from the flower-box lay scattered on the platform. Ferret picked up one of the chips and handed it to Eddy, who held it in his hands, examined it carefully and returned it to Chief Ferret. Eddy moved forward and craned his neck to see the balcony. He licked his lips. When he turned towards Frank, his eyes were accusing.

Frank felt his stomach go weak and nervous, but he took a deep breath and stared back cheerfully. Ferret looked at the stream. Then he placed the chip of stone between thumb and forefinger and flipped it in.

CHAPTER TEN

FERRET returned to the living-room and sat down on the long, curved red chair. He sat gingerly and let his weight settle gradually. Then he gave an experimental twitch, like a man trying to adapt himself to a stiff collar.

"It's a functional chair," remarked Alice. "It fits the curve of your back."

Ferret grunted, to give the impression that he'd been brought up on functional furniture and knew all about it. But he was unable to lean back and relax.

"Look," he said abruptly. "She disappeared. No corpse, no evidence of an accident. Just disappeared. That's all we got so far."

Frank repressed a smile. He hadn't thought he'd get off this easy. He said: "Cigar? There's one in the box next to you. Help yourself." Ferret took one and bit into it, but he didn't start the expected monologue on the American Legion.

"The way I see it," he continued, "she may show up. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow. That's something we just don't know."

"Sounds sensible. So?"

Charlie Ferret's jaw clamped down. "So I'm going on the theory that something did happen. If she shows up, there's nothing lost. If she doesn't, we're that much ahead of ourselves."

Frank murmured a yes. The pulse-hammering and the stomach-twitching started in again. He sensed that Alice's eyes were riveted on him.

"What's up on that balcony, over the platform?" asked Ferret.

Frank gulped. This was it. The investigation. "Balcony?" he said. "Nothing. It's just a balcony."

"Railing's broken."

"I know. Tried to fix it myself."

"I want to go up there," declared the chief. He got out of the chair with evident relief.

Frank led the way upstairs. A hundred thoughts raced through his head. He ought to divert Ferret, keep him out of Lola's room. Frank had been a fool. He should have prepared for this. A hundred

clues were in there. The mussed bed. The half-filled glass of water. Cigarette butts. His finger-prints. Dirt on the carpet.

Ferret couldn't miss.

At the landing, Alice turned. "I'm going up to see about Kathy's breakfast. You don't need me, do you, Chief? Frank can show you his study. And don't mind it too much, even if it's worse than the functional furniture. I just have that kind of taste."

"What?" said Ferret.

Alice laughed. "You'll see when you go in," she said.

Frank watched her run up the stairs and he felt a wave of gratitude. His study. Of course. That would explain it. It was nice to be carried away by the sheer, brilliantly simple nerve of the woman you loved.

"She's pulling your leg, Charlie," he remarked. Then he pushed open the door and walked in.

The violet rug looked garish in the morning light, but the mauve wallpaper and the lavender desk were softer and less fantastic than he'd foreseen. With a start of surprise he realized that it was a woman's room when you thought of it as Lola's, and a man's when you were told it was Frank's. A moment later, he almost yelled out in his shock.

There was not even a crease on the striped satin spread. The water-glass was empty and it shone with the effects of a recent polishing. Where he'd been sick, the rug was barely discoloured. The ash-tray was empty and hadn't been used in weeks. He'd cleaned up last night, but not like this.

Ferret stooped and picked up a sheet of newspaper before opening the balcony door. Then he marched outside.

"What happened here?" he demanded. "What was on the railing?"

"There used to be a flower-box," remarked Frank. "One of those stone things, with angels jitterbugging along the sides. It was ugly, and besides, it was too heavy for the railing. I took the thing down a few days ago. As you can see, part of the balustrade went along with it."

Ferret leaned cautiously over the edge. "Nice high dive," he said, "if you clear that platform. Now when this thing fell, did it hit the platform?"

"Yes."

"Where did it go?"

"It fell in."

"Where did it hit?"

"I don't know," said Frank. "I was off-balance, and I had all I could do to keep from following it." He took out cigarettes. "I assume it must have struck a glancing blow, and then gone into the water. That would account for those chips of stone on the edge. Smoke?"

Eddy materialized at Frank's side and took one. Ferret said, "We'll have to fish it up."

"I just told you it happened a couple of days ago."

Ferret took the cigar out of his mouth and made a face at the chewed end. "I heard you," he said. "Were you in this room last night, at any time?"

"No," said Frank.

Ferret grimaced. "Somebody was."

"How do you figure that?"

"I don't figure; I know."

Frank didn't speak. He turned towards Christopher and raised his eyebrows. The sad cop smiled.

"This," said Ferret. He held up the piece of newspaper which he'd found on the floor. "Yesterday's date."

"It—"

Frank started to speak to give excuses. The paper might have blown in. But it couldn't have, unless someone had opened the door. And as for the windows, they were screened.

"It what?" asked Ferret.

"Let me see it," said Frank. He took it, a half page, well crumpled, with some foreign matter sticking to the corner. The person who had cleaned the room must have wiped the rug with paper and thrown it out. This piece had caught near the door and been overlooked.

"It's the *Daily News*," said Frank. "We don't take it. We don't like it."

Ferret took the sheet back and handed it to Eddy. Eddy stuck it in his pocket. Exhibit A.

"You can see the stone chips where that flower-box hit," said

Ferret. "You get a pretty good view from here. Now look. Suppose Lola walked out of the library downstairs and wanted to beat it. She wouldn't swim. Where would she go?"

Frank backed against the doorway. "Lean over, Chief. To the left, towards the bridge, you'll see a narrow sort of path between the house and the water. It goes as far as the embankment. From there on, you practically have to crawl on your hands and knees. Not to mention the thorns."

"Maybe," admitted Ferret. "How about going to the right?"

"Try it. There's just that narrow ledge. The water is almost flush with the foundation wall of the house. That's what makes it wet. That's why we call it Damp House."

Ferret was still leaning forward. "So you couldn't go that way?"

"You could, but not Lola. She was terrified of water."

"Somebody else could have come in that way."

"Not unless he knew the house pretty well. Otherwise he'd try the path, from the top of the embankment. See it, near the wooden bridge?"

"Looks easy."

"In the dark, with all those thorns?" asked Frank.

"Everybody here last night knew the house pretty well, didn't they?"

"Well, they'd all been here, but whether they knew the paths and the conditions we've been talking about . . ." Frank shrugged.

Ferret turned around. It was clear that he didn't believe Frank. "Let's go."

They had reached the stairs when Alice came running down. Frank thought her smile was a little too sweet when she spoke to Charlie Ferret. "Did you find anything?" she asked.

"Nothing much," he answered. "A little of this and a little of that. Just getting the lay of the land." He stopped on the wide balcony overhanging the living-room. "What's this used for?"

"We call it the library," replied Alice. "On account of the books."

Eddy sniggered and Ferret strode into the alcove and let out a roar. "What's that thing?" he bellowed. "Do you tan leather?"

The Leather Man costume was still spread out on a chair. Frank picked it up.

"I got it last week," he explained. "It's supposed to be the original costume that the Leather Man wore. We're all pretty interested in him around here, so I grabbed it when I had the chance."

"There's fresh mud on it," said Ferret, pointing.

Frank examined the heavy jacket. It had been clean last night, but this morning the front was spattered with dirt. From where he'd fallen, of course.

He dropped the weighty block of leather and thought of the boot downstairs. The boot had been moved, although the room had not been cleaned and apparently nothing else had been touched.

Ferret lifted the leather costume. "Weighs enough," he observed. Eddy peered forward and his mild, gentle eyes were excited. Frank looked at the boot again and a slow, paralysing fear crept through him.

One boot downstairs, and the other up here. He'd almost worn them last night. He recalled asking himself whether it was worth going all the way downstairs just for a left-handed boot. The phrase had amused him. Therefore the right boot should be here. But it wasn't. He was staring at the left boot.

He sighed and moved away. He was mixed up, that was all. Just mixed up.

Alice's dark eyes were caressing him. He smiled, whispered: "Thanks, Monkey. Thanks for cleaning up my study and for being so damned intelligent."

She squinted. "Somebody has to look out for the baboons. Why not me?"

They stood there, leaning against the balcony rail, holding hands and experiencing a rich, quiet satisfaction while Ferret finished his investigation.

Then the chief asked Frank the question he'd been dreading.

"Tell me where everybody was last night, Frank. Where were you and whom do you remember seeing and who wasn't around?"

Frank coughed. Alice squeezed his hand. Sergeant Penscott came scampering down in his pyjamas. He saw the police uniforms and he saw Frank.

"Hello," he said. "Just heard Alice rush downstairs. Woke me up. How about Lola? Any trace of her? You fellows are on the job, I see. Been here long? You ought to have some coffee. Alice makes the best coffee in New York State. Come on up and keep me company while you ask your questions. I'm Alice's father—Penscott's the name. And yours?"

"I'm Chief Ferret. This is Christopher."

The little gnome shook hands briskly. "Glad to know you. We have something in common, Chief. My first name's Sergeant and I work for the W.P.B., and you're a policeman and your name's Ferret. What do you do when people pun on your name? You ought to arrest them, you know. You really ought. Stale jokes—bah!" He started up the stairs, pulling them along with the sweep of his energy and continuing his patter with barely a break.

"Don't mind me, Chief—I always ask questions. That's my job. Finding out what people can do to speed up production. When they're behind schedule, I send for them and I fire questions till they're dizzy. Second nature with me. Win the war. Coffee ready, Alice? Come on, Chief. What were you asking Frank when I came along?"

Ferret had trailed along like a man just ordered to answer an army questionnaire and not knowing where to start or how to go about it. Now he sat down meekly and obeyed Penscott's last order.

"I was trying to find out where everybody was," he said. "Maybe somebody sneaked into the game-room. We don't know whether they did, but just supposing. We got to know."

"So you want to place everybody, and you're asking Frank," said little Sergeant. He gulped his orange juice while his small, piercing blue eyes gleamed over the rim of the glass and fastened on Ferret. "Don't ask Frank. Frank doesn't know a damn' thing about what happened. Frank was locked up in his room all last night, from eight o'clock until nine-thirty."

Frank blinked. Ferret leaned forward and said: "What's that? Locked in his room? What for?"

Sergeant was enjoying his little act to the fullest. He smacked his lips and said: "So he couldn't get out, of course. Why else do you lock a man in a room?"

"I lock them up," said Ferret dryly, "because it's my legal duty.

And you locked Frank in a room. Why didn't you want him to get out?"

Sergeant reached for the sugar, carefully measured out two spoonfuls and then poured the cream. He stirred conscientiously and took his first sip before he spoke again.

"I did it," he said, "because Frank wasn't feeling well and that was the only way to get him to rest. He wanted to come down and be a host. Why the devil should he make the effort of mixing drinks when he had a splitting headache? Why should he stand at the door and greet everybody as they came in? They know the place—they were his friends—they wouldn't want him to knock himself out for the sake of an idiotic convention. And besides, it wasn't even his own wedding. Out of the goodness of his heart he got a minister and turned his house upside down and spent a couple of hundred dollars so that Red would have the sort of wedding that Lola's father should have given in the first place, dead or alive. When Frank wouldn't listen to reason, I waited for him to go to his room to shower, and then I locked him in and told him I'd let him out for the fun. There wasn't a damn' thing he could do about it, was there? So now what do you want to know?"

Ferret coughed. "I want to know where everybody was."

"I haven't the least idea," said Sergeant cheerfully. "I didn't know half of the people here and I didn't keep tabs on them and I can't be of the slightest help. As for Alice, she was in the kitchen. We're a hell of a bunch of witnesses, Chief."

Ferret said "Well," rubbed his chin and looked nonplussed. It was easy to see now why he was just a small-town cop. Sergeant was big league stuff, and under his impact Ferret faded away to an empty hulk with nothing but big muscles and a strong, solid jaw.

He got up and blinked. "We're going outside," he said. "I want to look at that embankment and see how bad those thorns really are." He hesitated momentarily, as if he needed Sergeant's permission to leave.

Sergeant beamed at Alice and said: "Good coffee. Always is." Then he seemed to notice Ferret. "Go ahead," he said. "Go look at the path."

The two policemen went out.

As soon as they had gone, Frank said: "Thanks for the alibi, Sergeant. You certainly have a way of handling the police."

"Don't thank me," said Sergeant. "I'm considering my own position. If you think I want to get mixed up in a murder case, or have somebody in my family get mixed up in it, then you're completely cockeyed. I'm a family man and I protect my clan because I'm damned if I'll have them say in public what they think in private."

"Speaking of family," said Frank, "I think I'll drop over and see Red."

"I just called," said Alice. "He's still sleeping it off. I'm going over later, before lunch. I'd go now, but I want to wait for Kathy. And Beatrice is coming to clean, after all."

"Life gets complicated," said Frank. "The police want to find out if Lola could have climbed the embankment, or if anyone else could have sneaked in from the outside."

Sergeant drummed his fingers on the table. "It would take too long to circle the house, enter the game-room, kill her and then climb up the ravine and come back via the front door. Of course, you might take a chance on simply walking in and out of the game-room and hoping nobody saw you, but that would be stupid. Unless"—his eyes seemed to pop with an idea—"unless it was somebody who wasn't even at the wedding. Was anybody left out?"

"Well," said Frank, "there's Arthur Blithe."

"Who's he?"

"Lola's brother. They lived together."

"Why wasn't he invited? The bride's brother. Only brother, too, wasn't he? You always invite your brothers and sisters to a wedding, no matter whom else you leave out. That's what's so horrible about weddings. Tell me about Lola's family. How about her parents? She came from around here—she must have had relatives. Where were they? Seems to me Red had all his friends and she didn't have a damn' soul. What was wrong with her?"

"Briefly," said Frank, "Shadow Hill, like most places not too far from the city, is separated into natives and New Yorkers. The natives farm the land, run the stores, monopolize the trades and belong to the churches. They keep New Yorkers out of their school

board and town board. That's the background for the beautiful black Republicanism which——”

“Don't give me a political lecture,” interrupted Sergeant. “I know my politics. So you disagree with the local set-up. All right. Now go ahead and stick to the point.”

“The New Yorkers,” continued Frank, “are more progressive, though you can find plenty of prize exceptions. On Leather Man Road we're supposed to be snooty, and we're definitely commuters. The Blithe family was the only one in the immediate neighbourhood that didn't belong.”

“Now you're getting somewhere. Lola wanted to break into society. Red is society. All right. How about her folks?”

“Her mother died some fifteen years ago, and her father was a drunk. Lola, and to some extent Arthur, though he'd never admit it, wanted to be considered part of the Leather Man crowd. Her kinfolk thought she was being uppity and they had no use for her, which was a fond and affectionate feeling compared to the way Lola felt about them. So that explains everybody except Arthur.”

“Go ahead.”

“Brother and sister living together. Grown-up, attractive, unmarried. Both of them proud, both of them spirited. Stress and strain, constant association—it came out in a harsh bitterness. Maybe they really hated each other, maybe they just thought they did.”

“He should have been tickled to death when she got married.”

“Sure. But not when she married Red.”

“Why? What's wrong with him?”

“Kathy's cats,” said Frank. “Remember her three Persians? One of them was Princess's ma, by one of the others, which was incest.

“Now Arthur had a big dumb mutt by the name of Franz, and when he grinned, he looked like von Papen. That's what we always called him. And Arthur, with his complicated pride, couldn't be made fun of.”

“Where do the cats come in?”

“Von Papen picked them off, one by one. The first time, Red went and told Arthur to keep von Papen tied up at night. Arthur got sore and said a dog had a right to be free, and Red and Arthur

had quite an argument. They both have tempers, you know. Kathy patched it up and had Arthur for dinner. He brought von Papen along, and while Arthur had chicken, von Papen had a cat. They found the body when Arthur went out to his car, and that time they really had a fight. Red, of course, knocked him cold. They haven't spoken since."

"What happened to the third cat?" asked Sergeant.

"Died. Of indigestion."

"I'm glad I don't live in the country," said Sergeant. "Cats. Dogs. Wives. Weddings. No controlling them."

Outside a starter whirred, and then the front door slammed. Eddy Christopher poked his head into the entrance to the dining-room.

"Thought I'd tell you we're leaving," he said sheepishly.

"Thanks," said Frank. "Did you try the embankment?"

"I did," said Eddy. "The chief watched." He rubbed his trousers and winced. "I got stuck good. Found something interesting, though. Well, I guess I'll be going." He bobbed out and the front door slammed again.

Alice looked at Frank. "He's bluffing," said Frank. "Trying to get a rise out of us."

Sergeant stood up. "That man is dangerous," he remarked. "And don't forget it."

"Dangerous?" repeated Frank. "To whom?"

Sergeant chased a fly from Frank's shoulder. "To you," he said. "My dear son-in-law, to you."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FRANK strolled outside. He heard the pigs squealing in their pen in the dip of land just beyond the garden, but he turned in the opposite direction, circled the house and crossed the wooden bridge. He stopped in the centre of it and looked down.

The stream cascaded down over a cluster of grey boulders and foamed past the house. He wondered what kind of a fool had built his foundations here. And what it had cost. Digging into the lush, gloomy bank of a ravine in order to be picturesque, in order to gaze into the pit of a canyon and think. No man in his sane mind would have chosen to live here.

Frank had chopped down a dozen or so trees in a vain invitation to the sunlight. It helped a little, but the angle was too sharp for the sun to penetrate for more than a couple of hours a day.

Frank stared at the opposite bank, at the sheer rocks and the thin, stringy birch that fought their way up through the giant pine. He wished he could dynamite the whole damn' cliff and let the sun in.

Well, the new dam would help, but he'd built it too late. The ravine was predestined for tragedy. Several of his friends had said, the first time they'd seen it, "A swell place for a murder, huh?" And the remark had always left Frank vaguely uneasy, as if the suggestion were liable to fall on the wrong ears.

Well, maybe it had. Maybe someone had clambered down from the very spot where he was standing. Frank noticed the bent stalks and broken twigs that marked somebody's passage.

Eddy's, of course.

Frank grunted moodily. It was so peaceful and quiet, and yet so threatening. The sound of the waterfall closed out all other noise and created its own audible silence. Frank repeated the phrase. So long as water ran downhill nothing but an explosion could break into the tranquillity of this spot.

Frank grimaced. All he demanded for the rest of his life was the chance to stand here with Alice and hold her hand. In peace. In love. In understanding.

He could see the platform outside the game-room and he could even distinguish the chips of stone scattered near the rim. They showed where the trough must have landed, but they left the basic question unsolved. The trough might have struck Lola, killed her and been deflected to the edge of the platform. Or it might have missed her completely and hit the edge a glancing blow. Either possibility explained why no one had heard the accident. There had been a relatively light impact and then a splash. Between the sound of the waterfall, the blare of the radio and the general excitement, no one had noticed anything unusual.

Frank crossed the bridge and followed the lip of the ravine to the new dam. The timbers of the forms stuck up in an ugly irregular line. One of the planks had been snapped off at the top. Some animal, he supposed. He bent down and felt the concrete. It was relatively soft, but when he put his hand on it and pressed, it no longer took an imprint. He looked for the spot where he'd scratched Alice's name. The name was no longer visible.

He stood up. He supposed he hadn't marked it deeply enough. At any other time he would have been bothered by the phenomenon of the disappearance, but he was getting used to minor mysteries. Boots walked around the house and guests vanished and wives cleaned up the evidence of murder. If the stream had suddenly reversed its direction and fallen up the rocks instead of down, he would have made an entry in his diary and let it go at that. Except that he didn't keep a diary.

If he had, it would have been full of speculation on guilt and on death. Frank's action had been purely accidental. The driver of a car which kills someone bears a greater guilt than he. No one in the world could have foreseen that reaching for a cat would have knocked over a stone trough and killed a human being. If it had.

He reached the road and turned up the hill. Red was still sleeping, but Frank could drop in at Arthur's, a half mile or so beyond.

Frank thought again of the Leather Man. The archetype of guilt. According to one version of the legend, he had unwittingly caused the death of the girl he loved, and the tragedy had unbalanced him. Frank might or might not have caused the death of a girl he

didn't love. The tragedy threatened him. It menaced both his peace of mind and his physical security. Legally, Frank was withholding material evidence, and he was well aware of it. But give the full story, and Frank would be held for murder.

He was not afraid, but his entire outlook had changed. He was faced with a problem and he had to solve it, one way or the other. He had to find out what had happened to Lola and whether he was responsible. And in the process he had to keep Alice out of it. She already knew he was in trouble, else she wouldn't have cleaned up Lola's study. He intended Alice to have no further worries.

He reached the top of the hill and saw Red's sprawling white house with the big berry patch at the side. There was a car in the driveway. Frank identified it at once as the Blithe coupé.

A moment later Frank saw them there on the porch. Red, still in his dressing-gown, and Arthur Blithe leaning against the porch rail. He was dressed in white flannels and shirt and he kept sticking his heel against the railing. Red raised his hand and Arthur swung around in a slow, deliberate manner. His grey eyes squinted. He called out a "Hello, Frank," but he didn't smile.

Frank called back. He should have known Arthur would be up here. The only trouble with him was that he was too proud, that he had a need of continuous personal victory and that his temper was too quick. But he blew hot and cold, and his left hand usually forgot what his right hand resented.

Frank climbed the porch and greeted them. "Any news of Lola?" he asked.

Red shook his head. Arthur said, from the corner of his mouth: "No. Nothing."

Frank pursed his lips and then unpursed them into his cheerful half-smile. "The police were over this morning," he said. "They didn't find a damn' thing."

"What was there to find?"

Frank grinned wryly. "Whatever there was, they didn't discover it. And I couldn't tell them, either." Arthur's face clouded and he rubbed at his wavy blond hair as if he expected to smooth it out. Frank went on. "What did she take with her last night, Arthur? Looked in her room?"

"Why should I?"

"She brought her stuff up here," said Red weakly. "Just what she thought she'd need on the trip. She hadn't moved in officially."

Frank stared at him. "You look lousy, Red."

Red pressed his freckled forehead. "I feel punk."

"I've been trying to tell him to take something for that hang-over," said Arthur. "A glass of sauerkraut juice with a dash of Worcestershire and some Tabasco. Plenty of Tabasco."

"I hate kraut," said Red. "It sounds German."

"The hell with what it sounds like," said Arthur grudgingly, from the corner of his mouth. "All you have to do is drink it."

"Tomato juice is better," said Red.

"Worst thing for you," declared Arthur. "Next to white of egg, it's the worst thing you can have."

"Tomato juice," said Red.

Arthur gave him a look of contempt. "Sure. Sit there and argue about it. You don't want to feel better. You want to sit there and look like a dying hero and have people come around and commiserate with you. What do you think, Frank? Will you help me stuff it down his throat?"

"Sure," said Frank. "I'll hold his feet."

Arthur stood up. His tallness, his long legs and long arms gave him an air of restrained power. "I'll make the stuff, and by golly —you're going to drink it." Red sighed and Arthur said, "Got any kraut juice?"

"How would I know?" asked Red.

For a moment Arthur looked beaten. Then he said, "Did Lola ever buy you any groceries?"

"She put in a supply yesterday," said Red. "Claimed my diet was all wrong."

Arthur nodded. "Then you got kraut juice." He strode aggressively into the house.

Red shuddered as the door slammed. "I hate kraut juice," he muttered.

"You're a damn' fool," said Frank without sympathy.

Red sighed. "I was pretty drunk last night."

"You had a right to be."

"How'd I get home?" asked Red suddenly. "Last thing I remember was telling Mathilda she was the only one that had a

chance to do her stuff at the wedding. She got off the first few bars."

"Jon and Bill Rapier walked you home."

Red smiled. "You mean I could walk?"

"After a fashion. Has Arthur been here long?"

"About a half hour. He woke me and said he wanted to make up. Said there was no damn' reason why we should continue to be sore. I said sure, I knew how he felt. He said he knew how I felt. You know those scenes. They're dumb. So I got up and showered and staggered down here and had a cup of black coffee. Then we started arguing about the hangover stuff."

"Did he tell you where he was last night?"

"He was working, wasn't he?"

"I don't know. I thought he might have mentioned something."

"Frank, what do the police think?"

Frank laughed. "When Charlie Ferret starts thinking, you can hand out Ph.D's for graduating from grammar school. He doesn't think. He just puts on an act and goes through the motions. As for Eddy Christopher, nobody knows what he thinks because he just looks sad. And when he does try and think, he only gets sadder."

"I know. But didn't they give you some idea of what they were going to do?"

"No. Eddy climbed the embankment and got scratched up. I think he went home to pull the thorns out of his backside."

"You're screwy," said Red.

Then Arthur came back with a glass containing a pale, amber-pink liquid. "Drink that," he said sullenly.

Red tasted it and made a face. Then he handed it to Frank. "You try."

Frank tasted it and handed it back to Red. "Tastes like whisky," he remarked.

"Sure it does," said Arthur, draping himself on the railing. "You never heard of a morning-after drink without whisky, did you?"

"I'm no authority. Finish it, Red."

Red hiccupped and made a wry face, but he drank. Frank stared

moodily. The three of us, he thought, and Lola. Her brother, her lover, her husband. Or almost her husband. And none of us knows where she is or what has happened to her.

He turned to Arthur and said, suddenly: "Where were you last night? Working?"

"What else?"

"I thought I saw you, near the house."

"You love to stick your nose in other people's business, don't you?" said Arthur.

Frank grinned. "Charlie Ferret asked where you were. We know Lola may show up. We know this may be just one of her eccentric ideas. On the other hand, something may have happened to her. I don't like lying to the police and then being told to mind my own business. Especially when all they have to do is call the plant and find out if you were there or not. My point was not to give them the idea that it was worth a 'phone call."

"What do you want me to do?" demanded Arthur. "Get down on my knees and thank you?"

"Where were you?" asked Frank again.

Arthur kicked sharply at the railing. "Home. I went for a short walk and came back. I was sore at Lola for pulling a dirty trick. Red had asked her to bring me up and she never even gave me the message. I guess I was brooding over it. Then I went home and had a few drinks. When the 'phone rang, I didn't even answer."

"What'll I tell Charlie Ferret if he asks me again? Or if he finds out I lied?"

"I can take care of myself," said Arthur. "I didn't ask you to make a liar out of yourself, so you'll have to get out of your own mess." He stood up and stretched. "Besides, you're talking as if somebody had killed her."

Red blinked. Frank said, slowly: "Why not? That's what we're thinking, so why kid ourselves? As long as we pretend everything's okay, we'll get sore at each other for no reason. You'll tell me to take my nose out of other people's business and I'll want to know where you were, and we'll end up in a free-for-all."

Arthur smiled. A big mongrel dog came trotting up the road, sniffed at the air in general and then approached the poison ivy and decided to pause. That business done with, the dog looked

at the house, barked a couple of times and trotted half-way to the porch.

"Von Papen," said Red.

Arthur gave Red a sharp glance. "Franz," he said. "Pronounced like France. The country."

Red's jaw clamped shut at what Lola used to call the bulldog angle. Arthur glared back. As if by mutual agreement, the two men stood up. Arthur, tall and wiry and sullen, Red big and immovable, breathing great, quiet breaths. Frank moved forward to break it up, in case he had to. But at least, he told himself, Red was feeling better.

Then Red smiled and relaxed. "All right. France, if you insist. Only get him out of here."

Arthur turned away. "France!" he yelled. "Go way—beat it!" The dog wagged its tail and galloped up to the porch.

Arthur leaned down and pointed. "Go!" he commanded. The dog let out a low bark and then jumped up to lick Arthur's face.

He turned to Red. "You can see for yourself I can't get rid of him. It's not my fault."

"If you can't control your dog," said Red, "you ought to shoot him."

"People that shoot dogs ought to be horsewhipped," said Arthur. "And I'd be glad to do it."

"Look," said Frank. "Stop scrapping over the dog and do something about Lola."

Arthur laughed sarcastically. "Lola!" he said. "She probably came to her senses and decided the hell with the guy."

Red took a deep breath. "I threw you out once," he said. "The way I feel now, I'd just love to do it again."

Frank took Red by the arm. "Pull yourself together, Red. The two of you ought to be scouring the countryside for her. Instead, you stand here and make faces at each other."

Arthur glared at Red, but he spoke to Frank. "Red wouldn't be bothered," he said. "He has a hangover and he got up at ten o'clock. He was worried—sure! What a guy like him needs is the army. Did they turn him down for psychiatric reasons?"

Red doubled up his fist. Franz barked and Frank grabbed Red

by the shoulder and spun him round. "Stop it, Red. Sit down and cool off."

"Sure," added Arthur. "Take it easy. What do you care about Lola? Sit on your front porch and let the neighbours come around and tell you how sorry they are. And what a bitch Lola was."

Red moved forward. Frank jabbed him back with his palm and strode over to Arthur. "You're making fools of yourselves, both of you. I don't know which one of you is dumber, but you'd better go, Arthur. Call me up later, will you?"

"What for?"

"I want to talk to you. Now beat it. Red's sorry and so are you, and you'll both admit it to yourselves in half an hour from now. I'm talking for the two of you. Go home, Arthur. And make up your mind what you're going to tell Charlie Ferret, when and if. He didn't mention you, and I just pulled that gag because I knew you hadn't gone to work last night and wanted you to admit it." He took Arthur's arm and walked him down the steps. "And besides," added Frank, in a low voice, "I saw you."

Arthur shot out a single word, in a scared, tense voice. "Where?" he asked.

"Where do you think? In the room where Lola was dressing?"

Frank kept staring. Arthur's dark grey eyes flashed ominously, his lip curled in sullen sarcasm and swelled up with anger. The fear, the worry in his voice. The sign that Frank was so sure he'd recognize when he saw it.

Had Arthur killed his sister?

The thought was too ugly to believe. Frank blinked. For a moment, during the instant his senses should have been keen and alert and supersensitive, his mind seemed to go blank and he despised himself for the suspicion.

Then Arthur said: "How would I know where she was dressing? What are you talking about, anyhow?"

"Nothing," said Frank. The chance was gone. He'd missed the moment and he had no answer, either way. Except that the question he'd asked himself was too real and too horrible to have anything except one answer. Arthur couldn't kill his sister. He wasn't a murderer. He was just a short-tempered patriot with a mean dog.

"Forget it," said Frank. "We're all upset today. I'd like to come down to the house later and look through some of Lola's things with you. There might be some clue as to what she did. Okay?"

Arthur climbed into the car. Franz barked happily and jumped in next to him. "Of course not," said Arthur. "Why should I let you go through Lola's stuff? Or do you just want some of your letters back?"

Frank slammed the door. "I don't write letters. What the hell's the matter with you, Arthur? Every time I try to be decent, you slap me in the face. Think I like it?"

Arthur bit his lips. Then he leaned out and slapped Frank on the shoulder. The gesture was awkward, embarrassed. Arthur didn't even smile. He merely tried to convey some sympathy of feeling, failed to do it gracefully and doubtless hated Frank the more for witnessing the *gaucherie*. Then he stepped on the starter and drove off.

Frank walked back to the porch. Red said: "So he was going to be my brother-in-law! Can you imagine that?"

"If he can't control himself, you should. Come on in and get dressed, Red. How do you feel?"

Red burst into a guffaw. "I hate to admit it, but that drink set me up beautifully. Head's clear, stomach's healthy, hands are steady. The guy's a magician, Frank."

"You certainly showed appreciation."

Red clumped up the stairs without answering. Frank followed and sat down on the bed. He watched Red peel off his bathrobe and shed his pyjamas.

"You have a build like an ox," remarked Frank. "It's too bad the rest of you didn't grow up."

Red spun round. "What do you mean?"

Frank threw a lighted cigarette at him and then lit one for himself. "That's the way houses get burnt down," observed Red, picking the cigarette off the floor.

"That's the way people burn their fingers, too. You're making a hell of a mess of things, Red. Looking back on it, this marriage of yours was all wrong."

Red pulled on his underwear. "I know what you mean. Now that this business has happened, I keep thinking of Kathy, and

wondering. I thought about what you said last night. Lola doesn't seem real."

"It's a beautiful time to find out. Any chance of your taking Kathy back?"

Red crumpled the clean shirt he'd just picked up. "Jeeze! She wouldn't have me! Don't start that, Frank."

"I'm not. But Kathy got a dirty deal, you went ahead with something you admit isn't even real, and Sergeant is convinced it's murder."

"Frank, keep that guy away from me!"

"Why?"

"He takes people apart. He asks questions and gets queer angles and leaves you feeling that everything that happened is your own fault."

"It is, Red. You brought this on. So did I. I'm in this because I fell for Lola. And almost married her, too. Do you realize we were both almost Lola's husband?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm not quite sure, except that I think we've both got an account to settle. The road is going to be turned topsy-turvy, if Lola doesn't show up. Your best friends—and mine—are going to look at us and wonder if we didn't get rid of her in some way. We'll look at each other and wonder the same thing. I want to get us straight, right at the beginning. Sergeant says we're the two obvious suspects, and he's right. We have to pull together, and we won't do it until we've talked this thing out."

Red zipped his trousers closed and tightened his belt. "You don't have to prove anything to me, Frank. If you say you had nothing to do with it, that's enough for me."

"And if I can't say it?"

"What do you mean?" asked Red sharply.

"I had a sunstroke yesterday afternoon and I can't remember what I did. That's why I made you lift the cement. For all I know, I killed Lola. What do you think of that?"

"How could you kill her? If you'd gone into the game-room you'd know it, wouldn't you?"

"Perhaps. The point is, I don't know my own alibi. But I do want to know yours."

"Fire away."

"All right. Where were you last night from seven to ten?"

"Sergeant walked me over about eight," said Red. "He gave me a drink and I wanted to see Lola. Mathilda got hold of me and said it was bad luck to see the bride."

"That's one superstition you can write off the books. It would have been the best luck in the world if you'd seen her."

"I did. We had a fight."

"What about?"

"You. The brooch you gave her. That thing with the pearls. Remember it?"

"Yes. It came from an antique shop on Third Avenue."

"She was wearing it and I told her to rip it off and throw it away. I didn't want her to get married in another man's jewellery. She said she'd get married in whatever she wanted to wear, and we battled it out. I won. And that's funny."

"What is?"

"She took it off and promised she wouldn't wear it. She put it on the table. I can't believe she put it on again. And yet it wasn't there last night."

"I didn't see it. I'll ask Alice. I'm assuming nobody copped it. Then what, Red? After the scrap?"

"We kissed and made up. I went up to the library and Stephen was there. Sergeant, too, though he left a couple of times. Said he had an errand."

"He was looking for me."

"Then Jon came, and a few minutes later Bill Rapier got here and said his car was in the ditch. Stephen's was in the driveway and so was mine, and Bill had tried to get past them and his wheels went in the ditch. He asked for some help and they all went."

"Including you?"

"No. They said I was the groom and I'd get my tie mussed. So I stayed."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I read the latest issue of *Life*."

"*Life*? We haven't a copy in the house."

"Then someone brought it in. Sergeant, maybe."

"No. He spoke about it and said he'd left his copy on the train."

"Don't give me that kind of bunk," said Red.

Downstairs, a door closed softly. Frank paid no attention. He said irritably, "You were alone for five or ten minutes—the crucial five or ten—and your alibi is untrue on the face of it."

"All right. It's untrue. So what? Is this a formal inquisition?"

"Exactly," said Frank. "I'm trying to convince myself, for once and all, that you had nothing to do with the possible murder of Lola. Lord! I want to be convinced, Red. So why hold out on me?"

"If you need proof, like a jury would, then the hell with you! That's not the kind of confidence I value."

"It's the kind I need. Look, Red—what did you do those five minutes that you were all alone in the den?"

Red whistled. Then Alice walked in. "Frank," she said, "aren't you being a little dramatic? Don't you know Red gets obstinate at the first sign that people don't believe him? When he was a kid he was spanked dozens of times for it. He'd say he hadn't done something, then they'd question him and Red would sit there and refuse to answer."

"He's grown up now," said Frank. "He ought to have some sense. He was with people all evening long, except for five minutes when he was alone in the library."

"He wasn't alone," said Alice. "I heard Bill ask for help with his car and they all trooped out and left Red in the library. I told them Red shouldn't be left alone, so they told me to keep him company. I went down and there he was."

"Where?" asked Frank.

Alice put her forefinger on Frank's head and rubbed. "Silly," she said. "He was sitting on the couch trying to read a copy of *Life*, and he couldn't even concentrate on the pictures."

"*Life?*" said Frank. "Where did that come from?"

"In the mail. Yesterday."

"It couldn't. Our subscription ran out."

"Yes, but I renewed it because you'd forgotten to. Didn't I mention it?"

Red Kerrigan sat down on the bed and roared.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN Frank came downstairs from Red's room, Sergeant was sitting on the porch and gazing peacefully at the panorama of hills and woodland that rolled up from the flat, blue patch of lake. But at sight of Frank, Sergeant burst into life with the clatter of a machine-gun.

"Nice view," he said. "When Red bought the place I said the hell with the house, what's the view like? Anybody can buy a nice house, but what can you do about it if it's in the wrong spot? People think they're being practical when they examine the cellar and furnace and ceiling. You can fix them, but whoever heard of repairing a view or redecorating a mountain? Practical people annoy me, anyhow. A person with sense pays attention to his soul—if he has one. How's Red? What's he doing? Get anything out of him?"

"No," said Frank. "Nothing to get."

"I thought not," said Sergeant. "Sit down, Frank, and tell me something about Rapier. Who is he? How long has he been here? And that wife of his—where'd he pick her up? What does he do for a living? Make dresses to display his wife in?"

"Which question do I answer first?" asked Frank. "And why?"

"He dropped over just after you left. Kept asking about you. Not a word about Red, but how you felt, where you were, whether you got up early, what the police said to you. What makes him so interested in you, anyhow?"

"I don't know," said Frank. "Maybe he likes me."

"Nonsense!" exploded Sergeant, and grinned.

Frank settled himself on the porch railing. "Bill's in the perfume business. House of Rapier—you send her, we'll scent her. You've heard of it, of course. His wife was a salesgirl or something for a competitor. Stood around the shop and got smelt at. I wouldn't know."

"With her figure," declared Sergeant, "they'd look—they wouldn't sniff."

Frank laughed. "A couple of years ago he bought that big place down the road, in a hollow, and began landscaping like a frustrated beaver. Terraces all over the place. Upper terrace, lower terrace, magnolia terrace. And flower gardens on every one of 'em. You'd think he'd grow just one vegetable for the hell of it, but not Bill. Farming's plebeian and he's climbing up, not down. The trouble with him is that he has more money than he knows what to do with. He figures that if he has something more expensive than you have, then he's a better man than you are, Gunga Din."

"Then why was he invited to the wedding? I thought it was such an exclusive gathering."

"Red didn't want to insult him by leaving him out. And besides, ever since the car pool, we've got to know him better. When you get spewed out of a coffee-pot in the early hours of a winter dawn, just seeing how miserable the other guy is makes you kind of fond of him. And he's a cheerful cuss—I'll say that much for him. Generous, too."

"Who's in your car pool?"

"Bill and Red and myself. Stephen when he goes to town, which he doesn't any more. Walter Ames was in it before the army took him. In the summer there are a couple of others."

"How about Jon?"

"He works at night. Just as well, too. He's an idealist and he'd get disillusioned if he saw us dash for the eight-eighteen. I get disillusioned myself."

"The devil with you. I was asking about Bill."

"Oh yes. You remember when coffee was rationed, don't you? And you know how Red loves his coffee. The way the navy takes it, he always says. Too thin to walk on and too thick to plough. Well he was complaining one morning about having to get along on one sickly brew a day. Bill was all surprise. Couldn't understand why anybody like Red should feel the coffee shortage. Red told him, kind of sarcastically, that there was a rumour the stuff was being rationed. Bill still couldn't understand. Offered to get Red all the coffee he needed. After that, Stephen dubbed him Black Market Bill, and Bill isn't sure to this day whether the name is a compliment to his cleverness or is just plain envy."

"Then he has nothing against you?" asked Sergeant.

Frank was surprised. "Against me? What would he have anything against me for? Of course not." He heard Red coming down the stairs and he said: "Don't ask Red too many questions, Sergeant. He has a hangover and he'll blow sky high. And remember that he just lost a wife."

"Kathy's his wife," declared Sergeant, and went inside.

Frank started down the road. He liked Sergeant, but the little guy could be trying. While he wasn't callous he had the curiosity and the nerve to ask anything he felt like, and there was no telling what he might unearth.

Frank wondered what had happened to that brooch. Nobody could have pocketed it, of course. Frank recalled how Lola had wanted to return it to him after they'd split up. He'd laughed her out of it. "What's the matter?" he'd asked. "Don't you like it?" She'd answered: "Of course I do. It's pretty. But I thought—" At that point he'd interrupted. "Then keep it," he'd said. And she had.

If he knew Lola, Red had spoilt the brooch for her. After the argument, it would have become hateful to her and she'd just as soon have thrown it in the water. And maybe she had. That seemed the most likely explanation. Still, Frank couldn't help thinking that it might show up. Came of a romantic turn of mind.

He fished into his pockets for cigarettes and then remembered he'd left his at Red's. He was opposite his house and he marched into the driveway. There was probably a pack of cigarettes in the jacket he'd worn last night. He might as well salvage them, or they'd stay there till the next wedding.

He was whistling as he entered his bedroom. He was getting out of things nicely. Alice and Sergeant had alibied him, the police were looking for clues in the underbrush, and downstairs he heard the vacuum cleaner whirring and sucking up any bits of evidence that might still incriminate him.

Still whistling, Frank put his hand in his jacket. The cigarettes were there, but so was something else. He frowned. Then he took the thing out and he stopped whistling.

It was the brooch.

Somehow, that knocked him cold. Ten minutes ago he'd told

himself it was the one important clue as to what had happened to Lola. Now he'd found it, and he was terrified.

He sat down and lit a cigarette. The bed was unmade. Alice's nightgown was tossed carelessly over the cover, but she'd folded his pyjamas carefully. Looking at Alice's nightgown didn't help.

He put the brooch in the palm of his hand and examined it. If Lola had been killed, her murderer ought to have the brooch. That was what had been in the back of Frank's mind. That was why he was shocked. He'd set out to investigate, and he was convicting himself.

He opened his bureau drawer and dropped the brooch in a corner. Then he picked it up. He ought to hide it somewhere. But where?

The overalls he'd worn yesterday while he'd been working on the dam were hanging up in the back of his closet. He liked dirty work-clothes and Alice never put them into the laundry until he gave her permission. He pinned the brooch on the inside of a trouser leg and closed the door.

He saw now that everything he'd done and thought today had been on the assumption that he was innocent. The possibility of his being involved in a crime had been a kind of game. And now he wasn't sure. If he had the brooch, he must have seen Lola.

But that was impossible. When could he have seen her? In delirium? Or somehow during the night? Could he have acted unconsciously, without remembering his act? Up till a few minutes ago he'd have laughed at the possibility. But now he wasn't sure. The brooch had been in his pocket. Either he'd put it there without any awareness, which he didn't believe, or else someone had planted it in his pocket. Which he didn't believe, either.

All of last evening's nightmare came back to him. He'd been sick, out of his mind. He could have no certainty of what he had done. He could no longer trust his own senses. He couldn't even be sure that his glimpse of Lola, just before Princess's jump, had been real.

He thought again of how strangely Sergeant had treated him, how Sergeant had lied to the police. He thought of how Alice had

cleaned Lola's room. Why had they done that? They had information he didn't have, and they were trying to protect him. Why? Did they think he'd killed Lola? Were they trying to keep him from finding that out?

He said "Nonsense!" aloud, and was still in doubt.

Suddenly he remembered an incident of his childhood. He'd woken one morning and gone to his mother and told her a burglar had been in his room during the night and that he'd scared the burglar away. His mother had laughed and told him he'd been dreaming, and for some reason her remark had infuriated Frank and he'd begun relating a myriad of details, and he'd finished by telling how the burglar had put his hand on the window-sill and shaken his fist at Frank, and then jumped out. And when Frank returned to his room there *was* a big, black hand-print on the sill. Frank had ended up not in the least certain that his burglar didn't exist.

There had been many explanations of the hand-print, of course, and Frank had cited the incident once or twice as an example of the functioning of a child's imagination. And though he assumed that the carpenter or the window-washer or the handyman had left a mark on the window-sill and that the child Frank had woven it into his dreams, nevertheless the recollection came back to him now and added to his self-doubts.

More because he didn't want to be alone than anything else, he left the house and went in the direction opposite to Red's. The Sir house was the nearest on the north side. Frank heard the sound of a lawn-mower. That, at least, was normal. It reminded him that he ought to get some exercise. Good, healthy muscular exertion was the best cure for colds, depression and hallucinations. Frank had never tried it on hallucinations before.

As he rounded the turn he saw Stephen's three cockers, Veni, Vidi and Vici, dash through a row of shrubs and chase the Sir cat up a tree. The dogs circled, barking frantically.

Mathilda, pushing the lawn-mower, was wearing shorts and her big muscular legs were exposed. Stephen was cutting flowers. He was working in the shade, but nevertheless he wore an old floppy rain hat to protect himself from the sun, just in case. His shirt had long sleeves, and the mosquito that nipped between the

cuffs and Stephen's garden gloves would have to earn his bite the hard way.

One of the dogs sighted Frank and came racing at him. The other two followed, with a very fury of barking. Mathilda looked up and saw him. She stopped mowing. Stephen dropped his flowers and his shears and stayed in the shade, where he was. His voice was cold as he greeted Frank.

Frank didn't get it. He was accustomed to see faces light up in the reflection of his own warmth, and he didn't understand what was wrong with Stephen. When Mathilda didn't rush at him as if he were her long-lost brother, Frank decided that the Sirs had been fighting and that he'd better overlook the reception. Besides, the dogs were making up for the Sir coolness.

"I was strolling by," said Frank affably. "Just came from Red's."

Mathilda pushed up the long handle of the mower and wiped sweat from her eyes. "How is he today?" she asked.

"Hangover," answered Frank. "Alice's working on him now." He didn't mention Arthur or his visit.

"I'll go up there later," announced Mathilda. "Is there any news of Lola?"

"Not a thing. The police were over this morning, but there wasn't anything for them to work on. She's just gone."

"Did they drag the stream?" demanded Mathilda.

"No—not yet," said Frank, and Stephen explained. "No point to it. The current would take anything and sweep it down-stream."

Mathilda exploded. "Of all the lazy, stupid things! How do they know what the current would do? Even with a current, things can catch on the bottom, can't they? I'm going right inside to 'phone them. And believe me—they'll be dragging that stream before lunch!"

Stephen watched her go. "Leave it to Mathilda," he said. "She's sore because Eileen went marketing without her. They usually share cars."

Frank made a face. "I wish Mathilda hadn't done that. She's right, of course, but somehow I'm afraid they might really find Lola's body. I dread that, Stephen. To tell the truth, I'd rather just go on wondering."

"I don't doubt it," said Stephen dryly. He picked up the shears and clicked them a few times just to hear the noise. "How's Kathy?" he asked.

"Fine."

"She's had a tough time. A divorce is never fun, and now she comes back and loses her best friend." Stephen studied the clippers. "Peculiar, that friendship between Kathy and Lola. Especially since Lola despised her."

"Why do you say that?" asked Frank.

"I worked with Lola yesterday morning," answered Stephen. "On that book we're collaborating on. We didn't get much done, but she told me about her Reno trip. She called it leading the horse to water. Kathy didn't drink much, you know. And she made remarks about why Red couldn't get rid of his own wives without bothering her."

"Lola never said anything nice about anyone in all her life."

"Except you," remarked Stephen. "She seemed to think you were in a class by yourself."

"If she'd included Alice, I might have appreciated her sentiments."

"What do you really think happened to her?" demanded Stephen.

Frank shrugged. "I don't know. I wouldn't put it past her to have planned the whole episode. If she'd changed her mind about marrying Red, it would be just like her to hold up the announcement until Mathilda started the Wedding March."

"That's what Mathilda resents more than anything else," said Stephen, smiling. "She likes to finish whatever she starts out to do, and she never did finish the Wedding March. She's been on the war-path ever since. Couldn't you arrange it so that Mathilda could finish her piano piece?"

"I'm afraid Red's out of the running for a while. That leaves nobody unmarried except Jon."

"And Kathy," added Stephen. "They'd make a nice match. I'll see what I can do about it." He squinted at the sun and slid back into the shadows of the house. "You look tired, Frank."

"I don't feel it."

"You probably don't realize it yet, but you will."

"Look," said Frank. "What goes, anyhow? Last night I was dead on my feet and you never even noticed it. Today I feel swell and you're trying to tell me I'm all tired out. You can't do it, Steve."

"We've all been under a strain, and I was just thinking of the queer things we do under stress. I knew a man who was in a railroad accident. He wasn't hurt, just shaken up a bit. But when he got home the next night, the first thing he did was grab a broom and whale the hell out of his cat."

"In your strange, back-handed way," remarked Frank, "you're trying to tell me something. What?"

"Nothing at all. I'm just making passes at being whimsical."

"I think I'll play, too. You said you worked with Lola yesterday. Tell me how she behaved. She must have talked about Red and her marriage. What did she say?"

Stephen compressed his lips. "I don't remember," he said slowly. "I don't remember."

"What's the matter?" asked Frank. "What did she do?"

Stephen licked his lips. "Frank, the curious thing is fear. So help me, I can't even remember what Lola looked like. Was she blonde or brunette? I don't even know!" He turned away and raked his fingers into the bare soil of the flower-bed. "The fear that Lola isn't dead and that I'll go back to what I've been these last few months. A parasite. A sucker feeding on someone else's talent." He looked up and his soft brown eyes were friendly. "I've been wanting to say that. Now that it's out I feel better. I can even remember what Lola looked like. She was tall. She had grey-brown eyes and her hair was the colour of peanut butter." He smiled engagingly. Then the door of his house banged and Mathilda came charging out.

"That Charlie Ferret!" she stormed. "I told him that if he had the sense he was born with, he'd have dragged the stream hours ago. And he said he had, and that the only thing at the bottom of it was the stone flower-box that used to be on the balcony. Then he got off the 'phone, and I spoke to Eddy and asked him when they'd dragged the stream, and you know what he said? That they hadn't! Wait till I get hold of that Ferret!"

"Leave him be," said Stephen. "He's going to have trouble enough."

"He won't know what trouble is, until I get hold of him! Of all the downright liars!"

"Did Eddy say anything else?" asked Frank.

"I'm too damn' mad to remember. Something about the flower-box, I think. Whether I'd noticed it was gone."

"What did you say?" asked Frank.

Mathilda laughed. "I said of course not. And besides, I hadn't been at your place since yesterday afternoon. Stephen, I'm going to get Charlie Ferret out of office if it's the last thing I ever do. I always said he was no good. Eddy has five times his brains and I'm going to see that Eddy gets the job."

"Mathilda," said Frank sharply. "Stop worrying about whom you're going to make Chief of Police and listen to me. You told Eddy the flower-box was in place yesterday afternoon?"

"Of course. What are you so worried about?"

"Because it wasn't, and I swore to it three hours ago."

"But I don't see—"

"Stop wondering, Mathilda, and listen. You're going back to that 'phone and tell Eddy you made a mistake and that you're ready to swear on the Bible that you misunderstood him. And don't knock him over with it, either. Talk about something else and let him bring up the subject. He'll want to check. And then say the opposite from what you said before, and make him believe it."

Mathilda gave Frank a queer look. For once her robust face went pale. "Frank," she said in a low voice, "tell me why."

"Why?" stormed Frank. "Why, why, why! You want something done, don't you? Ever since she disappeared you've been ranting because nobody does anything, and now that you're in the middle of it you collapse like a paper bag and you want reasons. You don't need reasons and you're not God and you'll do this for me because you know damn' well I'm in a hole and you want to get me out of it. Now go in there and 'phone Eddy and do it quick, or else don't ever dare speak to me as long as you live!"

Mathilda stared at Frank. "My God!" she moaned, and ran quickly into the house.

Stephen clicked the shears. "Thanks," he said. "Maybe you're not tired, at that. But I am." He sat down so suddenly that for a moment Frank thought he had fainted.

"What's the matter?" demanded Frank.

Stephen rolled his eyes. "Matter? All my life I wanted to see somebody order Mathilda around. Just once. I thought it couldn't be done. I thought the man capable of it didn't exist. And when he shows up, who is he? My next-door neighbour! It's like the search for the bluebird, when it's in your own backyard all the time!"

Stephen doubled up and rocked with laughter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FRANK stretched out on the ground and waited for Stephen to finish laughing. A car came by on the road, a hundred feet away, and Frank waved as a matter of course, without knowing who it was.

He turned and looked at the small, clapboard house, painted yellow. Behind it, a half dozen aged apple trees lifted their bare trunks to the skies. The Sir goat, which Mathilda had bought for milk and which in her excitement she'd never noticed was a male, galloped to the end of its long tether and pulled itself off its feet as the rope came taut. In peaceful and more leisurely days, one of the standard amusements had been to wander down to the Sir house and watch the goat try to decapitate itself.

A spotted cocker charged at Frank and stopped short to sniff at his shoe tops. Frank sat up, offered a finger to be licked and then cuffed lightly at the dog. It growled, balanced back on its haunches, and made a couple of passes at Frank. In the middle of the second one it developed an itch in one ear and called time out to scratch.

"Which one is that?" asked Frank.

"Vici. You can tell him by the arrangement of spots. There's a black one right on his medulla. Vidi's medulla is pure white."

Vici returned to the attack and Frank took out his handkerchief and waved it at the dog. "Where's his medulla?" he asked.

"I don't know. That's just a figure of speech I use." Stephen studied the clippers. "Why don't you go away for a few days, Frank? The rest would do you good."

"I am resting. I like it here. Right on this road we've got the most beautiful collection of women in Westchester. I'm on vacation this month and all I do is sleep late and mind the garden and look for a dog. Ever since that collie of mine died, I've been trying to get another one. The milkman has some police puppies due next month. He's going to save one, but I want another collie. Or a shepherd."

"Yes?" said Stephen crisply.

Frank glanced up. Stephen, easy-going, lazy, charming, hypochondriac Stephen had never been like this before. The Lola business was behind it, of course. But why? Why?

Veni came scooting around the corner of the house and dived for the handkerchief. Vici objected. There was a ripping sound, and Frank let it go and watched the two dogs wage a tug of war and slowly tear his best handkerchief to shreds.

"Steve," he said. "I hate this beating around the bush. Let fly, huh?" And when Stephen remained silent, Frank continued. "We're all friends around here, and no secrets. A guy can drop a pin at one end of the road, and a week later the people at the other end hear the explosion. The way things are, somebody's bound to come around and tell me what you're thinking, so why not come out with it?"

Stephen frowned. "You know that Leather Man costume you have? Did you wear it last night by any chance?"

"Yes. For a gag. Why?"

Stephen seemed to recoil. He blinked and licked his lips.

Then two shots sounded from the house. Frank leapt to his feet and cried, "What's that? Hey—Mathilda! Mathilda!"

At almost the same moment she came running out. She was waving a smoking gun and yelling. "Missed! Those damn' sneaking cussed little sons of b's! They were at it again!"

"Who? What?" demanded Frank. "And what's the gun for?"

Behind him, Stephen spoke lazily. "Chipmunks," he drawled. "They filch all our best apples and Mathilda shoots at them. And misses. She always misses."

Frank grabbed for the gun. "Give me that thing! You wave it around like a pin-wheel."

Mathilda stepped back. Stephen sat up and said, "I'll take it."

Meekly, Mathilda handed it to him.

Frank drew a deep breath. "You scare me, Mathilda. I don't like guns."

"Neither do I. I always have to close my eyes when I shoot."

Frank pursed his lips. "Never mind. Did you talk to Eddy?"

She nodded vehemently. "I did. And Frank Danzig, if you ever dare speak to me that way again, I'll kill you!"

"Perfectly right. And what did you say?"

"I started out being mad about his pretending they'd dragged the stream, and he laughed and then he asked me about the flower-box again and I told him. He took it meekly, and even said he thought he hadn't heard me right the first time. Frank, I'm going to get back at you for this!"

Frank said nothing. He remembered Sergeant's remark about Eddy. "That man's dangerous. To you." And it didn't sound like Eddy, or any other cop, to accept a contradiction without even arguing back.

Stephen stood up. "Mathilda's not fit company for anybody, Frank. I know these moods of hers. She's mad clear through."

"You bet I am," she said with energy. "And chiefly on account of Eileen. The nerve of that china doll, giving *me* the brush-off! I'll wring her neck the next time I see her!"

"Mathilda was working it off on the lawn-mower," observed Stephen. "We usually use the goat."

"Look," said Frank. "This isn't the time to get sore at people. Especially at Eileen, who's the weak sister. This seems like a hell of a good time to accept her in the community, instead of developing a grudge against her."

"It seems like a hell of a good time to wring her neck," maintained Mathilda.

Frank grinned. "Wring mine, instead." He leaned forward and Mathilda grabbed the back of his neck and shook. He laughed and lifted his head. She bit her lips hard. Her eyes were moist as she turned away and marched over to the lawn-mower.

Frank got up. "Come on, Stephen," he said. "Let's take a walk."

"Too hot."

"I want to show you something."

Stephen glanced from the gun to Frank. Then Stephen shrugged slightly. "All right," he said. "Where?"

"You're not going to bring that thing along with you, are you?"

"It's better in my hands than in the house, where Mathilda can get hold of it."

Frank didn't argue the point. The gun had been in the house for weeks and Mathilda could have picked it up any time she wanted.

But now, when Frank suggested a walk, Stephen couldn't leave the gun.

"Better bring a flashlight along, too," said Frank.

"Sure," said Stephen. "Anything else? I have a nice set of chopsticks that might come in handy."

Frank smiled pleasantly. Stephen walked over to the garage and returned with a flashlight.

"Where to, Professor?" he asked.

"I want to go up to the old Leather Man cave," said Frank. "And I'd like a witness, just in case."

Stephen halted. "Good God! You mean you want to look for the body?"

"I have an idea it might be there. The stream, you know."

"Uh-uh. Not me. You'd better get another boy friend."

Frank took him by the arm. "Come on, Steve. You're acting like a child. I can't take Red and I won't take Bill, and Sergeant would ask too many questions. So it has to be you."

"All right," said Stephen, "but first let's stop and pick up Jon."

Frank led the way. He was deeply puzzled, but he didn't ask any questions. He walked with concentration, taking long, angry strides and scarcely bothering to look at the countryside.

Picasso didn't bark as they came in sight of the red ice-house. Frank called out, "Jon?" and tried the door. It was open and he walked in. There were a few dishes stacked in the sink and a rumpled blanket lay on the couch. The portrait of Alice, dominating one wall, gave out a soft, gentle radiance.

"He's going to give me that some day," remarked Frank. "He doesn't know it yet, but he is. I'm going to move the Cézanne print that's over the fireplace and hang Alice's portrait there instead. Every country gentleman has to have either his wife or an ancestor over the mantelpiece. I'm conventional that way. Jon isn't here. Let's go, Steve."

Stephen pointed to a painting of a big, uncouth, bearded man. "That looks new," he remarked. "What is it? The Leather Man?"

"Yes. Jon did it last week, after a discussion we had." Frank headed for the door. "One of his few approaches to realism. According to all accounts, the Leather Man was so repulsive that at first

people ran away from him. After a couple of years they got accustomed to him. They saw he didn't mean any harm. Later, they even referred to him as sweet. They'd have liked a more cheerful legend, I suppose, but since they had no choice they came to cherish what they had. Come on, Steve."

Frank stopped for a few moments to look at the ice pond, a small, oval bit of water formed by a dammed-up stream. A couple of old, tangle-boughed apple trees and some overgrown blueberry bushes grew along the opposite bank. Frank turned and started walking again.

"What makes a legend?" asked Stephen. "Here's a man, obviously a maniac depressive, with an apocryphal history of an unhappy love affair. He was repulsive to look at and he undoubtedly smelled to high heaven. What makes him a legend instead of just an ordinary tramp?"

"Well, first of all the fact that you could rely on him. He was unchangeable. His timing, his route. His gentleness. His mysteriousness. Nobody was ever sure of the story. I haven't even been able to trace it down. Everybody who tells me about it heard it from someone else, and when I get far enough back, the someone else is always dead."

"Every demented beggar is mysterious."

"Yes, but the Leather Man was no beggar. And he set up emotional overtones of sympathy, once you got past his appearance. Everybody felt it. His obvious sorrow and his inability to do anything about it. And the fact that people believed there was some basis for it. That's what made him a legend and an archetype. He was atoning for the guilt that all people feel. He was the doctrine of original sin, which periodically has to be revived and relived. All of us feel the same basic guilt, possibly because, in our anxiety to break loose into this whirling old world, we half kill our mothers."

"You think everybody has his secret crime?"

Frank nodded. "Sure. And a need to expiate it. By doing a kind act we accomplish a sort of propitiation for our sins. By directing the kind act towards a known sinner, who is in the process of atoning, we make what amounts to a psychological bargain. He does the atoning, we pay him off. In food, in money, in hospitality.

Every civilization has its archetypes to symbolize a mass penance. Hence legends. Here's the cave, Stephen."

Frank had climbed part way up the hill behind his house. A mass of boulders, overgrown with thorns and wild grapes, seemed to push forward from the very bowels of the earth. A high narrow crevice yawned open between two of the largest rocks.

Stephen, holding the gun in one hand and the light in the other, looked doubtful. "In there?" he said. "It doesn't look respectable."

"Let's have the light," said Frank. He sidled in cautiously, feeling his way with his hands. He was almost blinded by the dimness and he stopped for a moment to let his eyes adjust.

"What I need is a little more vitamin A," he remarked. He switched on the flashlight. It glowed with a feeble, yellow beam. "You ought to use batteries with these things," he remarked. "What happened to it? It was all right last night, wasn't it?"

"I used it up," said Stephen. "And with the battery shortage you can't get replacements."

Frank edged forward into a small chamber. In the distance he heard the gurgling sound of water. He crossed the chamber and stooped low to squeeze through a tunnel.

"This is the only bad place," he said. "You have to watch where you go, just these three or four feet. There's a shelf on the side where I am, and a crevice to the left."

He turned to make sure that Stephen was all right. Stephen was standing still, with his feet planted wide, and he had raised the gun and levelled it at Frank.

Frank stared. "What the hell——"

Stephen's voice croaked hysterically. "Get back, Frank! Get back, or I'll shoot!"

Frank was too astounded even to be afraid. "Are you crazy?" he demanded.

Stephen laughed shrilly. "Hardly. But I don't take chances."

"What are you talking about?"

"Last night. In the dark."

"What? For heaven's sake, will you tell me what this is all about?"

"You knocked me out once, didn't you?"

"Me?" said Frank. "When? Where?"

"Get back!" said Stephen slowly. "I wasn't sure at first. I thought you might be walking in your sleep or something. Then, when you admitted you had the leather costume on, it was as good as confessing."

Frank took a deep breath. So it was Stephen he'd knocked down last night in the bushes outside the house. But—what had Stephen been doing there?

"Stephen," he said; "let's get this straight. You went walking in the dark. I came along dressed up as the Leather Man and you hit me. I didn't know who you were. You got up and hit me, so I socked back."

"I hit you?" exclaimed Stephen. "You *are* mad!"

"Look, Steve. Tell me what you were doing and what happened."

Stephen moved the gun closer to his hip. "After we got home last night, Mathilda and I were talking. You know Mathilda. She was sure Lola had fallen in. She was sure Bill and I hadn't looked thoroughly when we'd searched the stream. She wanted to go there herself and do it properly. I couldn't let her, of course, so I decided to do it myself."

"Then you sneaked down, saw the Leather Man come barging out of the house and you got scared."

"Not at all," said Stephen. "I got to the house and flashed my light down on the stream from the bridge. I couldn't see anything from that distance, so I started around the house to reach the stream at the lower end. On my way I saw a light inside in the hall. I thought I'd like company and started to go in."

"We left the light on in case Kathy came back. The door was locked."

"How could she get in if the door was locked?" asked Stephen.

"I forgot about that," said Frank. "What else, Steve?"

"You know what happened just as well as I do. I was on my way in when the door opened. You stepped out, looking like a prehistoric monster, and I was too scared to move. Honest. And then, without a word, you clipped me. Knocked me cold."

"I clipped you," admitted Frank, "but I couldn't see who you were. If you'd only spoken up——"

"You should have seen yourself," said Stephen dryly.

Frank didn't argue the point any further. There were discrepancies, but they weren't worth hashing over. Who had struck first, what time it had been, precisely where the scrap had taken place—they'd both been surprised and excited, and probably they were both mixed up. And anyhow, the details didn't matter.

"Look," said Frank, "I want to investigate the cave. If you're going to follow me with a gun, I can't help it. Only let's go."

He turned angrily and crept along the ledge of rock. When he had reached the end he turned and held the light for Stephen.

After that the going was easier. Frank followed the sound of the water, going downward on a firm, smooth floor. Suddenly the light went out.

Immediately Stephen's voice crackled sharply, "Frank, put that on!"

"Battery went dead."

"Then strike a match. And remember this gun!"

"Don't worry," said Frank dryly. "I'm not forgetting."

He struck the match and again he was blinded. The figure of Stephen materialized, a tall, slender silhouette with the glint of a metal object clenched tightly in its fist. Slowly, Stephen's other arm rose and his finger stretched out and pointed.

"Frank—look!"

Frank turned. A few feet away the wet rock humped up in a long, rectangular mound. In the centre of the mound was the unmistakable impression of a boot.

Frank stared. "That tread," he said. "The criss-crossed heel. That's the Leather Man's boot!"

"In solid rock?" asked Stephen.

Frank stared blankly. Stephen reached out and took the flashlight. He shook it briskly and did something to the switch. The feeble glow came on.

Gradually, Frank became aware of the harsh, measured panting of an animal. It seemed to come from above and behind. Stephen raised the light. Momentarily it caught two green glowing eyes. The gun exploded twice and it seemed to crash in Frank's very ear-drums. He wanted to yell at Stephen and tell him he was crazy, that the bullets would ricochet all over the place.

Then the animal charged. Stephen, too scared to fire again, leapt back. For an instant the flashlight caught the rushing shape that swept past and galloped wildly up the tunnel.

Frank gasped and cried out. "Picasso!" he exclaimed. "What's he doing here?"

"Don't know, don't care," replied Stephen shakily. "Come on, Frank—let's get out of here!"

They went.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THAT evening, Sergeant and Alice and Kathy and Frank sat under the overhang of the living-room balcony and played bridge. They played badly, from lack of practice, but they were thankful that they knew how.

"My ear itches," remarked Sergeant, over the first deal. "That's a sure sign of rain. Left side itch is rain, and right side is snow."

"What's sleet?" asked Alice, and Sergeant retorted promptly, "A pain in the neck."

Frank was dummy. He strolled to the entrance at the far end of the living-room, the entrance that was never used. A few steps led down to the lower end of the stream. It occurred to him that someone might have come in through that door the night of Lola's death. Arthur might have come in that way.

Except that the door was always locked.

He unlatched it and stepped out. Alice called to him.

"What is it, Frank?"

"Nothing. I just wanted a breath of air. It's clouding up." The sky was dark, with no stars visible, and he could almost feel the weight of heavy storm clouds pressing down on the thick, humid air.

At the end of the hand he closed the door and returned to the table. "We can use this rain for the crops," he remarked, "but I hate the thought of my dam getting wet."

"What happens when you let the water in?" asked Alice. "Doesn't it get wet?"

Frank laughed. "Sure. I meant the concrete has to dry out first. I want to take the forms off."

"Wait a week," said Sergeant. "Give it plenty of time."

Frank sat down. "I can't wait. I want to look at the thing before it's all covered up with water. I want to look and thump my chest and say: 'Me! I helped build that!'"

"Eileen was here this afternoon," said Alice, "while you were feeding the pigs. She stayed just long enough to say something nasty about Mathilda. What happened?"

"Mathilda's on the warpath. You know, that one pig isn't getting enough food. The others crowd the trough and eat everything up. The little one gets littler every day. I pass."

It was that way all evening. A casual game, with small-talk between the hands and no post-mortems. Jon had been in town all day. Bill Rapier had tarred his road, despite the fact that tar was unobtainable.

"You obtain it for thirty bucks a barrel," remarked Frank. "He offered to get me some the other day."

Chief Ferret and the doleful Eddy had dragged the stream that afternoon. They'd found nothing except the stone flower-trough, slightly chipped. Eddy had been deeply pained upon hearing a vacuum cleaner had been used in the living-room.

"He had his chance to get clues," said Sergeant. "He should have got them this morning."

"What does he think happened?" asked Kathy.

"He's not telling," said Frank. "And anyhow, he doesn't know."

"She's dead," said Kathy. "She must be dead." She waited for someone to contradict her. No one did. "I wish Red were here," she remarked suddenly.

"He went to visit some friends in Tompkinsville," said Frank. "I asked him over, but I didn't particularly insist. The change will be good for him. A few new faces."

"If it happened again," said Kathy, "I don't know what I'd do. I don't know yet what I did wrong. I could see it all happening. She started coming over evenings. She seemed so lonesome. She said she missed you, Frank, and we were sorry for her. I told her she ought to get a job. Red knew of an advertising opening. I thought she'd live in town if she was working. But she commuted. Every day, with Red. They sat together going down and back, every single day."

She bit her lips. Sergeant said, "One spade."

"He told me, just after Stephen and Mathilda had left one evening, that he wanted a divorce so that he could marry her. I said all right. We never even discussed it. I cried all night long and the next day he moved to town. He stayed there until I went to Reno. We had lunch together, just once."

"One spade," said Sergeant again.

Kathy raised her eyes. "I'm sorry. Pass."

The first clap of thunder seemed to smash into the living-room and split the house apart. The four of them looked up sheepishly. Frank said: "Better get candles, Alice. The lights are bound to go out eventually. They always do."

Alice took four ironstone candle-holders and set them down near the table. "Frank, look at the upstairs windows, will you, and see if any of them are open?"

Frank went up and slammed windows. The rain was beating against them in sheets. He hoped it wouldn't collect in the depression where his future pool was to be. If it did, the dam would never dry out.

When he returned to the living-room and reported everything under control, Sergeant was playing solitaire and Alice and Kathy, standing at the far end of the room, were watching the storm.

"What I'm wondering," said Sergeant, "is why she had to be alone in that game-room."

Frank shrugged.

"Suppose," said Sergeant, "she had somebody else in there with her. Ever think of that?"

"Yes. Who?"

Sergeant slapped the cards down in frustration. Suddenly Kathy flung open a window. A gust of wind slapped rain half-way across the room and the storm seemed to drive in with a savage, futile fury. A small lamp toppled over.

Sergeant snapped his head around. "You'll ruin the furniture and flood the house. Close that window!"

"It doesn't matter," said Alice quietly, and Frank felt a great, aching pride in her.

Kathy slammed the window shut and crossed the room with a quick, springy stride. Her blue eyes were alight and her whole being seemed to radiate excitement. "I love storms!" she cried. "Once, before we were married, Red and I went rowing in Central Park and a storm came up. Everybody raced for shore and tried to keep dry except us. Red just kept on rowing. The police yelled and blew whistles at us, but they didn't have a boat. They must have

thought we were crazy. Red stood up and thumbed his nose at them. We got drenched and we went to a bar and dripped water all over the stools. Red ordered hot lemonade. He loved bars. It's too bad he couldn't drink."

"Red's a fool," said Sergeant. "He gets you and then lets you go for the sake of a hare-brained ragamuffin with oozy lips. Lola! She should have been named Iolanthe or Isolde. Something with an *I*, as in ego. If Red has any sense he'll take you back. And if he doesn't, I'll marry you myself."

"Lola wasn't hare-brained and she wasn't a ragamuffin. You never even knew her."

"By their deeds ye shall know them. She cast a spell over the whole damn' community. What was she, anyhow? A witch?"

"Yes," said Kathy. "That's exactly what she was."

Alice went into the game-room, opened the small refrigerator and mixed drinks. She placed four tall glasses on a tray, garnished them with mint and brought them to the card-table.

Kathy tasted. "They're yummy," she said. "How do you make them?"

"It's an old family recipe that Sergeant taught me.

"The juice of a lotus, the touch of the moon,
A jigger of brandy, a slice of Rangoon."

She laughed and looked at Sergeant. "Remember?"

Sergeant grinned back at her. "Witchery," he said. "Dark, secret witchery. When you were a child, we gave you empty cordial bottles and a toy bar. You were a fetching infant. I wanted to enter you in a baby contest and let you earn your way through college, but your ma objected. You'd have won hands down. You still would, for that matter." He turned and spoke to Frank. "Ever think of entering her?"

Frank smiled. "It's too late, Sergeant. She's seen her best days. Besides, I couldn't part with her for that long. She picks clean socks for me every morning, and if she weren't there I'd get all confused."

The lights blinked and then went out. Frank struck a match and lit the four candles. Kathy rushed to a window and kept staring outside.

"It's wild," she said. "It frightens you. I'd love to go out and run naked through the storm."

"Go ahead," said Sergeant. "I'll watch."

Kathy came back to the table and sat down. "I was just talking," she yawned. "I'm tired."

Sergeant put his hand on her shoulder and stood up. "We're all tired. We went through a hell of a lot today and we need sleep. As the senior member, I'm sending everybody to bed. Take your candles and go up in single file. I'm going to tuck you all in, personally. And that goes for you, too, Kathy."

She picked up her candle and led the procession. Alice hummed "Come, all ye faithful", and the other three took it up, humming quietly, feet plunking rhythmically on each stair tread. In unison, they trooped into Kathy's room.

"You first," said Sergeant. "We'll all get undressed and then we'll come back here and send you to sleep with the proper ceremony. There's only one way to do it. It never failed with Alice or Red, and it won't fail with you."

Five minutes later Kathy crept into bed and Sergeant tucked her in carefully, as if she were a child. Then Alice leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Frank and Sergeant followed suit.

Sergeant walked to the head of the bed and chanted:

"Dream of flowers and downy thistles,
Dreams of lollipops and whistles.
Dream you buy them very cheap,
Count your change and fall asleep."

With the last word he blew out Kathy's candle and led the way to Alice's and Frank's room, where he repeated the ceremony.

After he had closed their door, Alice laughed quietly. "When I was a child, he always put me to bed that way and I'd start counting my pennies. Bright, copper ones, with Lincoln looking personally out of every one of them. Like this, One, two, three, four, five." She yawned and said sleepily: "You know, I never did get past thirty pennies. I always got gypped. I'd pretend I paid a dollar for five lollipops and so I had ninety-five cents coming to me, and I never got that far. Where was I? Seven, eight."

"You skipped six, Monkey."

She groped for his hand. "Six. Five, six. Pick up sticks. Kiss me good night, Frank."

He had never felt so close to her, so sure of her.

When he woke up, the grey, tentative light of pre-dawn was creeping into the room. He opened one eye and then came wide awake. Someone was standing in the doorway. Frank tensed and slowly slid his arms free of the covers.

He felt the man approaching him. A voice whispered "Frank", softly, and Frank turned his head and saw Jon. Frank gulped and signalled with his hand. He didn't realize how scared he'd been until he was out of bed and slipping on a bath-robe.

He sneaked out of the bedroom, closed the door and found Jon waiting for him in the corridor.

"What is it, Jon?"

"Didn't mean to wake you, Frank. But I saw all the lights burning downstairs and I thought you were still up. Then, when no one was around, I got worried and slipped into your bedroom."

Frank laughed. "The lights went off in the storm. We forgot to throw the switches, and when the current was turned on it lit up the house. Stupid, wasn't it?"

"Yes. My 'phone went off in the storm, and it's still out. That's what brought me over. I'd like to try yours."

"Why? What happened?"

"Plenty. Let's go where we can talk."

Frank led the way upstairs to the dining-room. "I'll put on some coffee, Jon. What is it?"

Jon sat down and lit his pipe. "The trouble is, I should have spoken up the other night. Remember how I said the wedding had to be stopped, and then I shut up?"

Frank switched on the stove and poured coffee into the percolator. Through the bank of windows that lined one side of the dining-room the grey light was brightening. Jon seemed strangely remote. His long features had no edges. His moustache fused with his cheeks and his grey, solemn eyes were dark pits underneath his shaggy brows.

Frank straddled a chair at one end of the table. "Yes," he said. "I remember all right."

"Well, Walt Ames stopped in to see me that afternoon. That's what I wanted to say. He'd left camp without permission. He explained a complicated system whereby he could get away with it for a couple of days. He said he was safe so long as nobody found out what he'd done. That's why I couldn't speak. I'd promised him not to. You see, he came to see Lola."

"Did he see her?"

"Yes. That afternoon. And he expected her to marry him."

"What about Red?"

"I don't know, Frank."

"But why didn't she tell Red?" demanded Frank in annoyance. "Why didn't she call off the wedding instead of letting everybody think she was going through with it?"

Jon shook his head slowly. "I think she *was* going through with it. She'd promised to marry Red and she was going to keep her promise, even though she was in love with somebody else. That's why I wanted to stop the wedding."

"But she did change her mind," insisted Frank.

"I didn't see her," said Jon. "I only know what Walt told me, and what he expected to do. They'd had quite a bit to drink. He said she was weakening and that he thought she'd change her mind."

"Then she did!" exclaimed Frank. "Obviously she did run off with him."

"I'm telling this badly," said Jon. "But I'm trying to get it straight, the way it happened. Walt had the whisky bottle and the last I saw of him he was going to meet Lola in the game-room and finish the bottle. Walt said they'd let me know as soon as they were married, and I was supposed to tell Red. But I never heard from them."

Frank heaved a deep sigh. Lola had run off. He knew now. He knew he hadn't killed her.

"This is good news, Jon. They're probably laying low because Walt's A.W.O.L. It's a dirty trick on Red, but we'll flush them out. Later on, we'll get busy with the 'phone and call the whole damn' country, if we have to. I can figure out the places where she'd most likely have gone."

"I found her," said Jon quietly. "She didn't go with Walt. That's why I'm here."

Frank got up and poured the coffee. He set the two cups down on the table. "You found her?"

"Yes. She's dead."

"Huh?" Frank couldn't grasp it. He'd just absolved himself. Now she was dead. She'd run off with Ames. If she'd gone with Ames, Frank had had nothing to do with it.

Jon went on gloomily. "When I got back from work this evening, a couple of hours ago, I found Picasso in a terrible state. He was almost hysterical. Dogs get that way, you know."

"Where was she?" asked Frank. But he knew. He'd sit here and listen to the words come out, but he knew. It was all clear now.

"I changed into old clothes and let Picasso lead me. He took me into the Leather Man cave. About half-way to the bed of the stream, I found the grave. At first it looked as if it were part of the rock, but when I examined it I saw it was meant to look that way. The body was encased in concrete."

"You saw the body?" asked Frank.

Jon nodded. "I went back for a pickaxe. I don't know whether I should have, but I had to be sure."

Frank stirred his coffee. Picasso in the cave yesterday, when he and Stephen had looked. Picasso had scared them and they'd never examined the footprint carefully. And the flashlight hadn't been strong enough to show the difference between concrete and rock.

Frank handed Jon the cream. Jon looked up. The light was brighter now, and his sharp, long face was heavy with worry.

"The funny thing," he said, "is that there was a boot-mark outlined on the grave. After going to all that trouble to blend in with the rock, whoever it was must have stepped on the thing by mistake."

Frank stared and didn't speak. He was trying to figure this thing out. If he'd killed her, would someone else have buried her? Had Ames killed her and then returned to camp? Could he do that, knowing Jon was bound to tell his story and that the first result of it would be Ames's arrest?

"About that footprint," said Jon. "It was an unusual one.

Broad and roughly shaped, and the heel was criss-crossed. It looked like the boot Red threw at me the other night."

"Come on downstairs and I'll show it to you. Have you seen Red since he did that? I know he wants to apologize."

"I don't blame him for throwing it. He was upset. I felt sorry for him even while I was speaking. But you can see why I didn't want the police brought in. And—" Jon hesitated. "A funny thing happened, Frank. Bill and I took Red home. Red was out on his feet, and just as we were going up the porch steps Bill deliberately tripped him. I don't know why I mention it. Red doesn't know, of course."

Frank, expecting something more, waited for Jon to continue. After a few moments, Jon said gently: "Frank, when I broke open the grave, my pick slipped and destroyed the imprint. I was wondering whether I ought to mention it."

Frank stood up and walked to the window. At the far edge of the lawn the grass was still grey and shadowy, but nearer, the bright green colour was beginning to emerge.

"I doubt whether it matters much," said Frank. "The police will want to know how somebody found sand and cement so handy. They'll learn that Red and I hauled some bags up to the field and left them a few feet from the cave entrance. There's a natural sand-pit right there, and I left a shovel sticking into it. They'll find out I mentioned the cement when we were all together, just before the wedding. That brings them straight to this house. I don't see that it matters much. Let's go look at the boot."

Frank led the way down to the library. The living-room lights were burning brightly and he turned them off from the upstairs switch. Then he picked up the boot and handed it to Jon. Jon held it in his hands and studied the sole.

"There's not much doubt about it," he said. "Now who would have worn them?"

Frank knew the obvious answer. The man who wore the leather costume must have worn the boots. And that person was Frank himself.

He turned round. Slowly, a puzzled expression crossed his face.

"What's the trouble?" asked Jon. "What are you looking for?"

"The Leather Man costume," answered Frank. "It's gone."

"Are you sure?"

Frank walked to the edge of the balcony. "Yes. It was lying on the chair you're standing next to. Alice said I ought to get it out of the way and I said I'd have to put hooks in the wall and hang it up. I said I was lazy and she said a day or two didn't make any difference. It's gone all right."

Jon sat down and rubbed his forehead. "I'm tired, Frank. I guess the best thing is to 'phone Charlie Ferret and get it over with. I've been up all night, but I won't get any sleep no matter what I do."

"Before you 'phone," said Frank, "let's figure this out. There are just two possibilities. One is that Walt killed her and either went back to camp or is wandering around somewhere. A.W.O.L. and waiting for the police to catch up to him. The other is that Walt didn't kill her, in which case he may not even know what happened. Under any of those circumstances, he's in for a stiff grilling."

"I don't know how we can help him," said Jon in a worried voice.

"I'm not thinking of him, Jon. I'm thinking of you."

"Me? What did I do?"

"You merely withheld the most vital information in the whole case. And if it's murder, which I'm assuming, the police aren't going to be very satisfied with your explanation. You see, they don't know you the way I do."

"But won't they realize that by talking I'd only have gotten Walt into trouble?"

"Sure," said Frank. "And that was compounding some sort of a military crime, wasn't it?"

"I never thought of it that way," said Jon. "What do you think I ought to do now? Give myself up?"

Frank burst out laughing. "Don't be so naïve, Jon. Let's 'phone Walt first. We'll get him if we make it sound important enough. Then you can find out whether or not he's going to mention seeing you. The important thing is for the pair of you to tell the same story. I'll get him, shall I?"

Jon nodded meekly. "Thanks, Frank. I'd appreciate it. Somehow, I get all mixed up when I talk to army officers."

Frank put through his call. After a long wait, he spoke to a private who referred him to a sergeant who referred him to a captain. The captain gave him the information that Private Walter Ames had been A.W.O.L. since last Thursday.

Then Frank called the police.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BEFORE the morning was over, Frank had developed a mild case of the jitters. True, Ferret was assuming that Walter Ames had killed Lola from jealousy and then gone on the lam. But as soon as Ames was found the whole situation would be changed radically.

Of course, if Ames confessed Frank would have no more worries, but that was too good to count on. The chances were either that Frank would be forced to incriminate himself to clear Ames, or else that the evidence against Frank would begin its slow, relentless accumulation.

There was plenty of it. The brooch led directly to him. The boot led to him. The Leather Man costume led to him. And finally he'd taken Stephen straight to the cave and showed him Lola's grave. Frank reflected wryly that every bit of proof he'd collected thus far pointed unerringly to himself.

True, someone else had buried Lola, but how could Frank show that? How could he even convince himself? In his disturbed state on Friday night, could he have walked in his sleep? Could he have buried a body in concrete and not even remembered?

That was obviously nonsense. And yet Frank had read of stranger things, of more curious psychological phenomena. The incredible part was that this was happening to him.

He watched Charlie Ferret and Eddy load a pick and shovel, a crow-bar and hammer and a couple of cold chisels on a wheelbarrow and head for the cave. Frank had no desire to follow. The bad news would find him soon enough.

The milkman came by and delivered the Sunday paper, as usual. He brought it to the door instead of leaving it in the mail-box. He grinned at Frank.

"How are the puppies?" asked Frank.

"Another couple of weeks ought to do it. I hear Miss Blithe was found."

"Ferret and Eddy are up there now. How did you know?"

"Jane Ferret told the wife and she 'phoned me along the route.

She always gets me up at the Evers' place when there's something to tell."

Despite the fact that it was Sunday, the fuel oil man drove his big truck into the driveway. "Thought you might be wanting some kerosene," he yelled. "They found Lola, huh?"

The editor of the local paper stopped in. She had a couple of children in tow and she asked questions crisply and scrawled notes on a pad of paper. She made no comments, except to suggest that Frank prune the shrubs at the west end of his lawn.

"You prune them right after they flower," she said. "Take off the seed pods, and you'll see how much better they'll be next year."

Alice and Sergeant went over to Red's. "I wish we could stay there all day and have dinner with him," said Alice. "But there's Kathy."

"Good chance to bring them together," said Sergeant. "They belong to each other, whether they know it or not."

Eddy returned to the house to telephone. Frank followed him inside and asked what he'd found.

"Can't be sure," said Eddy, "but she has a nasty head wound. Have to wait for the autopsy before we know whether that killed her or whether she got it after she was dead. That concrete is nasty stuff." He picked up the 'phone and called for the state police and a mortuary wagon.

Frank stepped back and waited. With his mouth curved upward in the hint of a grin, with his lopsided ears and his frank, cheerful features, he gave no hint of his thoughts. Walking in on the pair, seeing the small worried man at the 'phone and the big, pleasant man watching him, you'd have thought it was the other way round, that Frank was investigating the case and Eddy was eating himself out with fear.

But Frank's mind kept beating a sombre rhythm of despair, kept appraising the facts and judging his chances. A bang on the head. Of course. From the flower-box. There must be chips of stone embedded in the skull; the autopsy would find them. The doctor might mistake them for bits of gravel from the concrete. A careless doctor might make that mistake, but a careful one wouldn't. Frank had to figure that the doctor would be careful.

Eddy put down the 'phone. "I'd like a look at that Leather Man boot," he said.

"Sure." Frank led the way downstairs. Eddy hadn't asked about the leather costume and Frank decided not to mention it. There was no point in raising questions. Ever. Under any circumstances.

Eddy studied the boot. "How did the concrete get on it?" he asked suddenly.

Frank started. "Concrete?"

Eddy handed it to him. "See for yourself."

"That's strange," said Frank, examining the boot. "I don't understand."

Eddy took the boot with him and went back to the cave. Frank settled down in a deck-chair and tackled the Sunday paper. Kathy came across the lawn and asked for the magazine section.

"I want to do the crossword puzzle," she said. "It takes my mind off things."

A turmoil of grunting exploded from the direction of the pigpen and Frank jumped up. "The damn' things got out again!" he yelled.

He chased three pigs and caught the smallest one by the tail and started to drag it back. One of the big ones charged up the lawn and made for a flower-bed. Frank dropped his pig and rushed for the other one. Kathy, beating a tablespoon on a tin pan, emerged from the kitchen.

"Here, piggy, piggy, piggy," she called. The big sow abandoned the flower-bed and trailed after her. Frank burst out laughing.

"Hey, Pied Piper!" he yelled. "What is this strange power you have over pigs?"

Kathy, still chattering at the pigs, didn't hear. The last he saw of her was a slender figure in blue disappearing over the rise of ground with three hogs in tow.

She didn't come back. The state police arrived, complete with a hearse, and Frank sent them round the other way, past the dam and via the rutted path he'd taken with Red the other night.

The Rapiers drove their big station wagon into the parking space and shouted a greeting. Frank marched over to the car.

"I hear they found her," began Bill. "Where is she now?"

"They're digging. Concrete, you know."

Eileen shivered.

"What did she look like?" asked Bill. His chubby face was solemn, interested.

"I don't know," answered Frank crisply. "I didn't see. Jon found her."

"We were going to stop by there anyhow," said Rapier, but he made no move to go. "What did the police say?"

"Nothing," said Frank. "Look, Bill. Why don't you go and ask them? They're in the cave. If you're so damn' interested—"

"Maybe I will, at that," said Rapier. "They might need help."

Stephen and Mathilda came strolling into the driveway. Eileen tugged at her husband's sleeve. "Bill," she said. "Let's go down to Jon's."

Rapier glanced at the Sirs, hesitated and then stepped on the starter. But he didn't figure on Mathilda. She marched straight in front of the car and roared out a cheery hello.

Eileen smiled in embarrassment. "We were just leaving," she said coldly.

Mathilda pulled open the door. Frank got set to drag her away, by the hair if necessary.

"Eileen Rapier!" shouted Mathilda. "I'm glad I finally found you, so I can tell you what's on my mind."

"I don't know what you're talking about," began Eileen, but Mathilda drowned her out.

"The world's too damn' small to get angry at each other," she trumpeted. "I'm sorry I was sharp the other evening, and we're both going to forget it. We people on Leather Man Road ought to have sense enough to stick together, or the rest of our lives are going to be hell, with half of us not talking to the other half. I'm simply not going to be snubbed by you or by anybody else, and if you have anything against me, you're going to come out and say it right now." She glared belligerently, daring Eileen to be anything other than friendly.

Eileen blinked. She opened her mouth to answer, but her lip quivered and she burst suddenly into tears. "I thought you didn't like me," she sobbed. "I thought you were going to make nasty remarks and I—I—I couldn't have stood it!"

"Get in the car," ordered Rapier. "The bunch of you. We're going to my place, because this calls for a drink."

Stephen leered. "Don't be rash, Bill. No man can buy me for anything less than champagne."

"You'll get your champagne," laughed Rapier. "You can have a whole bottle to yourself. Imported, too. The hell with murder—this is friendship! Coming, Frank?"

Frank shook his head. "Sorry, but I have to stick around. Maybe I'll be over later, Bill."

Bill waved triumphantly. "Sure thing. Any time at all. Here we go, girls—hold your hats!" The car rocked forward and swirled up the driveway to the road. Rapier honked and raced his motor as he took the turn. Frowning, Frank watched, but he felt better than he had at any time since Jon had wakened him with the news.

Frank went back to his paper. About an hour later a battered car stopped at the mail-box. A car door slammed and Arthur Blithe stepped out. He yelled something at the driver. Frank caught the phrase, "Crazy fool", and then he realized that Arthur was drunk.

He walked steadily enough, but there was a stiffness to his tall body and his straw hat was set too far on the side of his head. His blue suit was neat and well pressed, but the cuffs were edged with dirt.

Frank got up. "Hello, Arthur. Come from church?"

Arthur Blithe stopped. Except for his stiffness, except for the way his head never stayed quite still, he gave no indication that he'd been drinking.

"Not from church," he said. "That's where I started, but they called me out. To identify a body. Have you seen her?"

"No," said Frank. "Look, suppose you sit down, Arthur. I know it's tough."

"The hell you do!" exploded Arthur. His jaw moved forward and his murky grey eyes shot sparks of hate. His mouth wasn't sullen and twisted now; it was stretched straight and wide. "You don't know a damn' thing about it!" he stormed. "They ought to make you look at her, too. She's not pretty, Frank. Not any more. Not after what you did to her."

"Me?"

"Yes, you! I've been hearing stories. Where were you the other

night, huh? Seems nobody saw you. Seems you kept away from everybody, tight up till the ceremony started."

Frank stared back steadily. There was no point in denying, no point in defending himself. Arthur had worked himself up to an emotional pitch and, until he released his tension, there was no reasoning with him.

"And where were you?" demanded Frank sharply. "Outside, weren't you? How the hell do you come to ask questions?"

Arthur uttered a grunting sound and picked up a heavy metal chair. His breath panted out with the effort of lifting it. He swung it high over his head and sent it smashing down at Frank with all his long, lean strength.

Frank jumped behind the table and tipped it up as the chair crashed. A pottery water-pitcher caught the glancing blow and split neatly in two. One half went sliding off the table. Arthur grabbed the other in a wild, reckless scoop that might have slashed his hand down to the bone. But he was lucky. He raised the jagged piece of earthenware and started a savage, murderous swing.

Frank saw a loose chair rail. He picked it up and feinted at a dive to his left. Arthur followed the motion and swung wildly, off-balance. He didn't drop the piece of pottery. He whirled and tried again, but this time Frank didn't give him a chance. Frank stepped in and slapped the chair rail against Arthur's blond skull. Arthur dropped heavily to the ground.

Frank took a deep breath and looked round. The car had disappeared. No one had seen the short, furious fight. Arthur was sprawled full length. A trickle of blood came from just above his right ear and slid slowly down his cheek.

For one panicky instant it flashed across Frank's brain that he'd just killed a man. Then Frank said "No" aloud, in a gruff, determined voice, as if his will could settle the matter. He bent down and felt for Arthur's pulse. It was beating rapidly.

With a sigh and a prayer, Frank picked Arthur up in his arms and carried him into the house. Arthur muttered and made hoarse moaning sounds. His head lolled back and his eyelids fluttered. The whites underneath were glassy.

"No," said Frank resolutely. "You're not hurt. You can't be."

There had been enough tragedy. Frank wasn't a fool and he

didn't get into stupid, avoidable trouble. He'd had a sunstroke the other day and the consequences had been disastrous. This time he had cracked a man with a wooden club, but there were going to be no consequences. The man was going to be all right in a few minutes. Frank willed it so.

He put Arthur down on his bed, went into the bathroom and soaked a wash-cloth in water. He brought it back, dabbed it on Arthur's forehead and began washing the wound.

Arthur groaned and opened his eyes. "Frank," he said. "Lola." Then he blinked and his whole body shook. "You damn——"

He sat up suddenly, grunted and then doubled himself up on the bed and began to cry. "Lola!" he cried out. "You should have seen her! Was going to get married on Friday, and today——"

"I know. I know. It wasn't your fault."

With the tears pouring down his face Arthur looked up. "Who said it wasn't my fault? It was all my fault. Every bit of it. I never treated her right. I was nasty to her, Frank. I didn't want her to get married. I tried to break her. If I'd been nice to her, she never would have wanted to get married. She'd have stayed home, been happy. I never treated her right, did I?"

"You're not to blame," said Frank softly.

"I didn't want her to marry him. Now I'll never have the chance to make up. She's dead, Frank. Dead! They made me come in and identify. You should have seen her! God, Frank! So I went out and had a drink. I didn't treat her right. Kept people away. I fought with everybody, tried to keep them away from her. First time I met you, I wanted to get you drunk and make a fool of you. Now I'm never going to have a chance to be nice to her."

Frank put his hand on Arthur's shoulder. Arthur laughed. "The two of us, here!" he tittered. Then he shook his head and the tears came again. "I wanted to make up. The night of the wedding, I wandered around. Wanted to kill myself. Wanted to kill her or Red. I didn't care. Just so things changed. I was going to be friends with Red. He's a nice guy, Frank. You're a nice guy, too. You don't know what it's like to be my kind. I'm going to move away. Can't face anybody. You don't know what it's like. Living there alone, cooking for myself. I was going to burn the damn' house down. Make a big fire and watch it burn. Then I remembered I was the

fire warden and I'd have to put it out. Doesn't make sense, does it?"

"Why don't you come up and live here a while?" said Frank. "We have plenty of room. You shouldn't be alone, anyhow. That's what's bad."

Arthur stopped crying. "You—want me here?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Arthur shook his head. "After what I did to you?"

"You didn't do a damn' thing, but you got a nasty sock. How do you feel now?"

Arthur touched his head and brushed down the soft, wavy hair. "Feels all right. What happened, Frank? I remember getting mad. I was going to swing at you. And then—it's all blank. What did I do? What happened?"

Frank grinned. "You didn't do a damn' thing," he said slowly. "You started to take a poke at me, and then you lost your balance and fell over. You hit your head on the edge of the table and knocked yourself out."

Arthur sat up. "I feel a little shaky. I'm glad I didn't sock you, Frank. I was afraid I had. I get mad and lose my head. And then I don't even remember."

"How long since you've had anything to eat?" asked Frank suddenly.

Arthur shrugged. "I don't know. Yesterday, some time. I've been feeling punk. I had a couple of drinks this morning instead of breakfast. I guess I'm a damn' fool." He stood up and glanced round the room in a daze. "But they shouldn't have made me look at Lola." He grabbed Frank's arm and squeezed. "They shouldn't have done that, should they?"

"Of course not," said Frank. "Look—let's go upstairs and see what Alice has in her ice-box."

Arthur was still hugging Frank's arm. "Frank, if they want you to look at her, for God's sake say no! Will you promise?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SITTING in the kitchen and devouring Frank's thick, improvised sandwiches, Arthur revived.

"I didn't mean to break down and cry on your doorstep, Frank. But I guess you know better than anybody else the kind of life I had with Lola."

Frank munched a square of cheese and gazed at the grey tiling and the bank of cupboards that seemed to hang down from the ceiling. "I think I know," he said. "She never made any secret of it."

"Not to you. But for the benefit of everybody else she played the part of a tender, solicitous sister. We didn't entertain, of course, and nobody ever dropped in, but outside of that there wasn't a hint of anything wrong."

"Why did you stick it out?"

Arthur finished his glass of milk and poured a fresh one. "I couldn't walk out on my own sister. Besides, whenever things got close to the breaking point she'd have a spell of sweetness, and I'd begin to feel like a heel and think it was all my fault. I always felt there had to be a way to get through to her, if I could only find it. You see how it was?"

Frank nodded. "Yes. I know her sweet side all right. In fact, until a few months ago that was all I'd ever seen. But recently . . ." He frowned and cut another sliver of cheese.

"You and my father," said Arthur. "She was the same way to him, up until the time he began to get drunk around the house. But she couldn't stand that. She'd yell at him and call him all kinds of names. Or else she'd go sullen. Wouldn't talk to him, wouldn't give him any food. I'd try to argue with her. I figured she could make him his old self again, if she only wanted to. But apparently she didn't want." Arthur pushed his chair back from the table. "I remember the day my father died. She didn't even cry. Just went around the house with her eyes sort of bright and shiny. When Aunt Millie said she was going to take the two of us to live with her, Lola turned to her and said: 'No, thanks. I'm not going back to an

outhouse.' Then she took my hand and held it, as if the two of us had talked it over and agreed on a common behaviour. I was so stunned I just stood there and didn't say a word. As for Aunt Millie, she never even answered. She sort of wilted, and a few minutes later she went away. She never set foot in the house again. I guess that was what Lola wanted."

"The two of you," remarked Frank. "I never could figure it out."

"Neither could I," said Arthur. "At first I tried to overlook things. Then, when she kept treating me like the hired man, I tried to shut up and take it. That didn't do any good, of course, so after a time I let myself go and we'd have it out like a pair of mad dogs. All the hard, bitter words! I was ashamed of those scenes and I'd go off and get drunk, to forget about them." He shook his head. "I don't understand it. I just don't understand."

"Look," said Frank. "You don't need condolence from me, so I'm going to give you something else, straight from the shoulder. She wrecked your life—or made a hell of a good try at it, didn't she? And she wrecked Red's and she made Walter Ames either a murderer or an army deserter. She hated her relatives and she didn't have a damn' thing to do with them. Your job from now on is to reconstruct. Pack up this afternoon and clear out of the house. Come and stay here, if you like. Or if you'd rather not, if you'd rather keep away from all talk of Lola—and I think you should—then you have plenty of friends and family you can live with, haven't you?"

"Sure." Arthur laughed lightly for the first time. "I could go to Aunt Millie's. She's wanted that for years. And with a family of seven, one more or less won't matter. Hell—they probably won't even know I'm there."

"Then let's get going." Frank stood up. "I'll have to call Red's and tell Alice I'll be out for a while. I'd better borrow Red's car, too. Mine's down at the station."

He started for the 'phone, but Arthur's voice stopped him. "Frank!"

"Yes?" Frank swung around. Arthur Blithe was smiling. His mouth had lost its sullen, twisted expression and his whole face had relaxed and brightened.

"I'm not much good at thanks," he said. "But I want you to know how I feel. First of all for getting me inside after I keeled over. And then for what you've been saying."

Frank grinned. "Forget it," he said. He wheeled and marched out to the 'phone.

Alice's voice answered. "Hello?" she said.

"Look, this is Frank and——"

"Oh, darling," she interrupted. "I'm so sorry. You're hungry and I forgot to feed you, only I didn't really forget. I neglected you deliberately."

"Thanks, Monkey. I hope your conscience suffers, but I ate anyhow. Arthur dropped over and we cleaned out the refrigerator. I'm going down to his place now and we need a car. Tell Red I'm taking his."

"Of course."

"I'll leave a note for Kathy. What'll I tell her about starving?"

"Oh, don't bother," said Alice casually. "She's here with us. Sergeant brought her." And Alice hung up.

Frank muttered under his breath. "My wife!" he said. Then he and Arthur went out.

It was the first time in almost a year that Frank had been in the small, up-ended match-box of a house, and he was amazed that he'd been so little aware of the tastelessness of it. The ancient, stuffed furniture with too much wood and no soft spots was not ugly of and by itself. But somehow the arrangement made it so.

When Lola had decorated the study in Frank's house, she'd said, "For the first time in my life I'm going to have a room that's mine and that will look the way I want it to." Frank had put his arm around her and thought of the old, shabby pieces in the Blithe house, but it had never occurred to him that their ugliness was her own doing.

Arthur slapped his straw hat down on the table and flicked his finger through a spider's web between table and wall.

"It's the same old place," he said. "Once a week somebody sweeps it up and gets rid of the dirt, but sometimes I wonder what for." He picked up the 'phone. "Make yourself comfortable, Frank. I'm going to find out whether my aunt feels like taking in an orphan."

"Go ahead," said Frank. "I'll wander around."

He went upstairs, turned to the left and entered Lola's bedroom. He whistled slowly in astonishment, and then he closed the door.

The room combined the elaborate perfection of a furniture-store display with the unmistakable stamp of a high-class brothel. Frank stood quietly and tried to take it all in. The delicate, flowered wall-paper. The ebony and rosewood furniture and bed. The fluffy, purple chenille rugs. The embroidered bedspread, lavender again. The long row of cosmetic bottles and jars, all stamped in gold with Lola's initials. The two gigantic, decorative powder-puffs. The hanging dolls on either side of the mirror. The frills and unabashed rococo femininity of it.

He crossed the room slowly, thinking of Lola's remark about never having had a room of her own. Grunting to himself, he opened a bureau drawer. Silk underthings were strewn about in haphazard untidiness. He opened a second drawer. Costume jewellery, a few pairs of silk stockings, some handkerchiefs and a couple of ragged envelopes.

He picked up one of the envelopes. It was addressed to Lola, and in place of a stamp was written the word *free*. In the corner it said Pvt. W. Ames, and gave the name of the army camp.

Frank pulled out the letter and unfolded it. He glanced through it rapidly. *Lola darling, I've figured out a way . . . you won't marry Kerrigan . . . you belong to me, and you know it . . . have you got any more money from Rapier? . . . good for five thousand and can afford it . . . never mind why, but until I leave the country, he'll pay . . . as for Frank, he's soft-hearted . . . will do anything you want . . .*

Frank dropped the letter into his pocket and opened the next. It concerned sunsets and loneliness and love and it repeated the same refrain. "*You belong to me. You can't marry Kerrigan.*"

Frank sat down. Lola getting love letters from Ames while she was planning to marry Red. She'd encouraged Ames, of course. No one would write that way unless he knew he had the right. And Rapier being blackmailed. Why? What had he done and how did he enter the picture?

Arthur called out, "Frank?" Frank rose obediently and marched out of the room. He was glad to get away from his own thoughts.

"It's all set with Aunt Millie," sang out Arthur. Then, noticing

where Frank had come from, Arthur's voice grew serious. "Oh. So you've been in there! It's something, isn't it? You know, she never even let me in the place. Always kept her door locked. I broke in yesterday for the first time, and boy, what a surprise!"

"It sort of knocked me over, too."

"You mean you'd never seen it before, either? I always thought——" Arthur cut himself off and dumped the contents of a bureau drawer on to the bed. A slip of paper blew outward and spun leisurely down to the rug. Frank picked up the small white rectangle and started to crumple it. Then he noticed the writing and he read it, aloud.

"Arthur, Arthur, if you sip so,
Constantly you'll be a dipsy.
You'll become a drunken sot.
Charming, clever, you'll be not."

"What do you call that?" asked Frank slowly.

Arthur's mouth curled at one corner. "One of her what-do-you-call-'ems. She used to leave these bits of doggerel around the house all the time. There's another one here, some place." He stooped and fished it from the trash basket. "Here it is. I found this one stuck in the medicine-chest. Just listen.

"How can people look so nice
When half the time they act like lice?
The answer, dear, will be much clearer
If you'll consult your shaving mirror.'

"What do you think of them, Frank?"

"Let's pack up and get out of here," said Frank sharply.

"Sure," said Arthur. "You know, I bet some day I'll look back on this and think it's funny."

A half hour later they carried Arthur's bags out of the house and piled them in his car. Franz came from the rear of the house and jumped up on the front seat. Arthur started to climb in, but he turned around, with one foot on the running-board.

"The ancestral mansion," he said bitterly. "I used to think I'd be working those fields the rest of my life. I thought of the day I'd bring a wife in, and of the kids that would be running around

yelling Daddy at me. I even thought Lola would come and visit me some day and that she'd be calmer and more at peace with herself. But this . . ." He shrugged and got into the car. His smile was timid and embarrassed.

Frank didn't speak. For a moment the two of them looked at each other, each of them full of an emotion and of the memory of a girl who had mixed hate and love, venom and sweetness so thoroughly that she had all but generated a new emotion.

Then Arthur stepped on the starter. Franz barked once. Frank waved and the car moved forward to the road. A man and his dog, moving on to a new life.

Frank took a deep breath and lit a cigarette. Arthur, the guy he'd seen sneaking up the embankment of the ravine the other night. Arthur, who had been prowling around the house and had apparently socked Frank in the dark.

Frank shook his head. Somehow, all that didn't count any more. The important thing was that Frank felt deeply, genuinely sorry for Arthur. He understood now why Arthur had been so truculent yesterday morning. Naturally Arthur had wanted people to butt out. Alone with Lola, living in that atmosphere of hate and incipient murder. . . .

Frank looked up. Arthur had had every reason in the world to kill his sister. Undoubtedly she'd prodded and goaded him into thinking about it.

But Arthur hadn't done it. He blew hot and cold. He was capable of killing Lola in a rage, but not of burying her in concrete. That took a subtlety and a control that Arthur lacked. He'd have confessed the next day. He'd have gone off his head or got rip-roaring drunk.

And yet it was worth remembering that Arthur had made no mention of sneaking around the house and having a fight with the Leather Man. Was it Steve, after all, whom Frank had struck? Had they got so mixed up that their accounts sounded like different incidents, instead of two versions of the same one?

Possibly, but Frank didn't think so. And if not, had someone else dressed up as the Leather Man, struck Stephen and buried Lola's body in the cave? And—who?

Frank flicked away his cigarette and marched over to Red's car.

It was beginning to dawn on him that he'd never get anywhere in this case. All the possible suspects were his friends. He'd die rather than believe any of them had committed a murder. The whole idea was ridiculous. They were nice people, all of them. Friendly, decent, pacific, loyal. Except maybe Bill Rapier.

Frank touched his pocket lightly and felt the letter crinkle. Rapier. Frank should have gone up there long ago.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WHEN you approached Bill Rapier's house you knew you were getting somewhere. Four Koster blue spruce, at a hundred dollars apiece, flanked an elaborate iron gate. Bill Rapier had left out the dollar sign, but you got the idea none the less.

You could see the house from the road. It was a spacious brick structure garnished like a black market roast with ornamental greens and fronted by a large swimming-pool in which a small boat in the shape of a swan floated in solitary uselessness. Behind the house the gardens rose in newly built tiers, treeless and vaguely ashamed of their bareness. Beyond, the forest grew in comfortable luxury.

Frank drove in, wondering what George, the 4-F butler, thought of it all. George had T.B. and had been advised to get a job in the country. Since the Rapiers usually ate on the terrace, George got his fresh air every day. Frank supposed that that was why he stayed.

Bill Rapier, wearing a tan slack suit and an army officer's cap with the insignia removed, was examining some rose-bushes when Frank parked. Rapier came forward leisurely.

"Hello, Frank. I thought it was Red when I saw the car."

"Mine's getting fixed," remarked Frank, and asked himself whether, with anyone else in the world, he would have come out with a lie.

"Where?" asked Bill. "I was at the garage this morning and didn't see it. You have all your work done at Henry's, don't you?"

"Sure. But Henry keeps the car up in his bedroom. For me." Frank grinned to take the edge off his sarcasm. "I was sorry I couldn't come over this morning, Bill, but my place was as busy as Grand Central Terminal."

Rapier shrugged. "I didn't mind. I knew you'd come to me, eventually."

"You sound ominous."

"Do I?" said Bill casually. "How about a drink? We can have it inside or else out here on the terrace."

Frank glanced from the flagstoned terrace to the silent swan guarding the pond. "In," he said.

Bill led the way into the house. "George!" he called. "George! Where the hell is—" He broke off as George, a tall, stalwart, strong-jawed man in a white jacket, came through the kitchen door.

"Hello, Mr. Danzig," he said.

"Hello, George. Seen that friend of yours about the collie pups?"

"He thinks he may have one next week."

"Fine," said Frank. "About the price—anything you think is fair will be all right with me."

George smiled. "It won't cost you anything, Mr. Danzig. He's doing it for me."

Rapier put his hands in his pockets and gave George a look of proprietary approval. "You get hold of the damnedest things," he said genially. "How about bringing some drinks to the library, George? Those mint things, like you made last week."

"Yes, sir," said George, and withdrew.

In the panelled library with somebody's coat-of-arms embossed on the fireplace, Frank sat down and stretched his legs. By mutual consent he and Rapier avoided basic issues until George brought the drinks. They spoke of the best orchard spray and whether apples were worth the trouble of growing. They discussed ways to get rid of poison ivy and mentioned cursorily that it was too bad the wedding hadn't gone through after all Alice's trouble.

Then George arrived with two tall, silver glasses. Frank sipped and said, "Delicious, George."

"He won't tell me what's in it," remarked Bill. "Professional secret."

"Alice is the same way," said Frank. "When I ask her how she makes her best drinks, she recites poetry to me."

George grinned and left the room. Rapier picked a pipe from a carved, ivory rack and filled it ceremoniously. It looked frail above his broad, blunt chin. Frank coughed. He was no good at making accusations. Even in school he always felt sorry for the boys he had to discipline.

"I came across something pretty amazing," began Frank. "I just

found out that you'd been paying Lola blackmail because of something Walt Ames had on you."

Rapier finished lighting his pipe and blew out the match. His chubby face under the thatch of curly hair was completely unconcerned.

"I wouldn't call it blackmail," he said evenly. "I simply lent her money because I'm that sort of a guy."

"That wasn't your reason, Bill. Walt was an accountant. I suppose he went over your books and found things. Is that it?"

"That's a funny question for *you* to ask."

"Why me?"

"Because," said Rapier quietly, "you're in no position to go to the police. Not after asking a friend of yours to fake the wedding ceremony."

"Where did you get that story?"

"From you. You forget we're on the same party wire, don't you?"

"If you make trouble for Marlowe," said Frank steadily, "I'll run you out of the community. And I can do it, too."

Rapier puffed on his pipe. "You won't do that either, because I can turn you over to the police right this minute." He put the pipe down and lifted his glass, but his eyes never left Frank. "I saw you go into that room over the game-room. I stood at a living-room window and watched through the curtains. You stepped out to the balcony and pushed over that flower-box. Any time I feel like it, I can accuse you of murder."

Frank felt his heart stop. So Rapier had seen. Rapier knew. Did he know, too, how Lola had been killed?

Frank didn't ask. He smiled slowly. "Why don't you turn me in, then?"

Bill Rapier leaned forward, but his face was still expressionless. "Because if I did, I wouldn't have a friend left on Leather Man Road. I'd be ostracized and cut off from the whole community. That's why. As it is, I'm not going to say a damn' thing and you're going to be under an obligation to me for the rest of your life."

"Bad reason," said Frank, "because I'm not going to live with a sword hanging over my neck."

"There won't be any sword. I haven't talked and I'm not going to. I just want you to know what I could have done, and didn't."

"I don't get it, Bill."

Rapier took a quick gulp from his glass and leaned forward. He spoke heatedly. "I bought a house and I fixed it up and the neighbours can drop in any time they want, and know they're welcome. They can swim in summer and skate in winter, and when they want a drink they can yell for George and they don't even have to bother looking for me. But they don't. They only come up here when I invite them. They drop in at your place and at Red's every time they have a spare minute, but not here. Why? Why? What's wrong with me and what do they think I am, anyhow?"

"Stop looking around for reasons, because they're not there. They're inside you, Bill. In your own self."

Rapier laughed sharply. "That's a hell of a thing to say, when I just told you I could accuse you of murder."

Frank shook his head. It was not a matter he cared to explain. He'd almost have liked the police to charge him so that they and not he would have to decide the question of his guilt. Bill Rapier didn't know it, but his hold on Frank was absolutely non-existent. Rapier could go to the police or not. It didn't matter. Frank had no fear, because it was swallowed up by the prospect of finally ridding himself of doubt.

"Look," he said, "there's something you don't seem to understand. We're not snobs here, any of us, but we do object to chiselling. Your brand-new tyres and your tar road and your new copper gutters, when none of that stuff can be bought in legitimate channels."

"Oh," said Bill, "you're jealous."

"No," said Frank. "You are."

Rapier laughed breezily and started to speak, but Frank cut him off.

"What you don't understand," he said, "is that we just don't like black markets. We'd rather do without. We don't live for things, but for good will and simplicity and intangible values. That's why we're here, all of us. We love the country for what it represents, just as you must, fundamentally. But we're trying to build a way of life. There's a place here for you, but not while you think the way you

do. You see, you can't buy what you're after, because it's not for sale."

"You're off the point," began Rapier.

"No," said Frank. "The point is that you imagine we don't like you, and you're wrong. What you see in us is the reflection of your own shortcomings. First you decide we're snobs, and then you think you can impress us with a butler and the best Scotch on the market. What you don't understand is that we'd rather drink rot-gut and meet you on a plane of human honesty. We don't want to be impressed. All we want is plain, ordinary decency."

"You're taking a lot of words to say you don't like me. You think I'm conceited and you want to change me."

Frank pursed his lips. "Well, wouldn't you like to change yourself? So why not try another tack?"

"What do I do? Distribute a case of champagne, or what?"

"Try a very simple thing, Bill. Come down to Red's with me, right now. You'll find a badly worried bunch. Spend a little while seeing how many of them you can unworry. Then let me know how you've liked it."

Rapier grunted. "You're just a school-teacher, preaching ethics. I'm a business man. Suppose I spent tomorrow morning trying to unworry a certain guy who is three days overdue on the delivery of some merchandise I happen to need. Just where would that get me?"

"If he has the stuff, he'll deliver; if he hasn't, what can you do about it? Shoot him?"

"He'll get the stuff, and he'll take it out of a shipment that he has ready to send to a competitor of mine. And he'll do it because he'll be so damn' scared that he'd rather go bankrupt than welsh on my order."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. Then he'll hate your guts, you'll have your goods and you'll put another thousand dollars in the bank."

"Thousand!" exclaimed Rapier. "That order means ten thousand to me, clear profit!"

"Need the money?"

"Of course I do."

"What for? Behind on your taxes?"

"Are you crazy?" asked Bill Rapier.

"No. I just thought you wanted a few friends."

Bill Rapier stared. "Frank," he said. "I'd like to smash your face in. Jeeze, you can be nasty!"

"You can do better than take a poke at me, Bill. You can turn me over to the police." Frank stood up. "I'm going down to Red's. Coming?"

Rapier's broad, blunt chin seemed to grow wider than ever. "I think I will, at that."

On the way down they scarcely spoke. Frank, driving, kept wondering what was behind Rapier's attitude. Was he covering up something? Had he really seen Frank on the balcony, or was he making a wild bluff? And if so, to what purpose?

On the other hand, suppose Bill had been telling the truth. Suppose he were simply naïve. The misfit on Leather Man Road, trying desperately to be liked and not knowing why he failed. Brooding over it, too proud to admit his shortcomings or to ask advice. Then, when he thought he had Frank in a corner where Frank couldn't speak, coming out with it. Talking as he might talk to a man who was about to die. Unburdening himself to an audience that could never betray the confidence.

"Better watch the road," said Rapier.

Frank swung the car back towards the centre. "Thanks," he said. "I always have a tendency to wander."

"I don't like Red," snapped Rapier suddenly. "He gets everything he wants. Never seems to care and never seems to work for anything. The rest of us sweat for what we have, but Red—it just falls in his lap."

"Like Lola?" asked Frank.

"Maybe he's luckier this way. Ever think of that?"

"Ask him, Bill. Just ask him, and see how he feels."

"Another thing," said Rapier. "You're not going to mention what I said to you. You understand that, don't you?"

"You still haven't told me what Ames and Lola had on you," said Frank imperturbably. "Don't forget that part of it, either."

Rapier didn't answer. The car was dipping into the hollow where Damp House was located. Frank glanced at it to see if Alice

was home. The grey, gabled structure, tucked neatly into the side of the ravine, seemed to growl sleepily at him. The main door, which Alice usually left open during the summer when the screen door was in place, was closed now. Alice was not home. Frank stepped on the throttle in an effort to make the hill in high, but the wheels lost traction on the bumps of the dirt road and he had to shift into second.

At Red's driveway Frank turned sharply and felt the pull of gravel as the car ploughed up the short grade and came to a stop inside the garage. Frank turned off the ignition and stepped out.

Rapier tugged at his sleeve. "You're right about Ames," he said unexpectedly. "He thought he had something on me. Tax stuff. But I'd fight him through every court in the country rather than let him blackmail me. I gave Lola money just for the hell of it, so that Red would hear about it some day and feel like a heel."

He strode angrily past Frank. Frank stopped at the entrance to the garage and gazed at the view. He envied Red this site. Frank was stuck down in a valley. If he ever bought another house, the first thing he'd look for would be a view. Sergeant had been right. You can remodel a house, but the landscape stays the way it is.

Red crossed the lawn and called out. "Hi, Frank." Frank waved back and watched Red's heavy body move with an easy, natural grace. Frank thought of Red heaving bags of cement, just two days ago. If Frank had left the stuff down at the dam . . .

"Nice, isn't it?" remarked Red. "Where were you all day, Frank? We missed you."

"I helped Arthur move out. He went to live with the Jim Blithes, over on Dutchman's Lane."

"I hope he left his disposition behind him."

"I think he did."

"I don't get him, Frank. What has he against me, anyhow?"

"Nothing, Red."

"Sure he has, and it worries me. You know, I never had an enemy in my life, and all of a sudden I have two, right in my own community."

"Who else?"

"Bill Rapier. What made you bring him, Frank?"

Frank shrugged. "We were talking and I asked him to come

along with me. He jumped at the chance. What makes you call him an enemy, Red?"

"I've been thinking back. Dozens of remarks he's made. Little things he's done. Trying to bribe workmen away from me whenever I hired anybody. Wisecracking every chance he had. A whole string of incidents that I never even thought about at the time."

"Why think of them now?"

Red frowned. His big, freckled, friendly face looked tired and drawn. "The other night when I was drunk, he helped Jon take me home. Just as we were going up the porch steps, he deliberately tripped me. And upstairs, he wanted to dump me on the floor and go on home. Funny, huh? What has he against me, Frank?"

"I don't know. Suppose you let it go for a while and see if he doesn't get a little friendlier, huh?"

Red laughed and dropped a big paw on Frank's shoulder. "Sure. Turn the other cheek. Frank, I think you actually suffer every time a couple of people on this road quarrel with each other. But not me, brother, not me. I believe evil of my enemies. I think they're swine and I treat them as such." Red started walking back to the house. "Tell me—did you ever hate anybody? Really hate, without finding excuses for them?"

"Did you?"

"Sure. I just finished telling you I hate Bill Rapier. But what I mean is, suppose you found out somebody had committed a crime, without excuse, purely selfish, egotistic reasons. Suppose that person had been a friend of yours, somebody you'd loved and respected. Then what?"

Frank stopped short and grabbed Red's arm. "Red," he demanded furiously, "what the hell are you driving at?"

Red shrugged. "Don't be so upset, Frank. I was just supposing. Come on in the house and see my surprise."

When Frank entered the long, low living-room with the white-washed fireplace and the profusion of comfortable chairs and small, low coffee-tables, his tension relaxed and it seemed like old times again. For Kathy Kerrigan was entertaining.

Both her food and her technique were famous. The two big tea-wagons that Red had built to her order were loaded with food. Rich, creamy salads on home-grown lettuce. A whole ham. A roast

chicken. Four kinds of bread and three kinds of cake, and beer bottles wherever you looked.

And Kathy was in complete command. Smiling, ruffling Sergeant's hair, insisting that Bill send for Eileen and that Frank finish up the chicken, she kept flitting around Red like a grateful animal waiting to be petted.

"Alice and I spent the whole day in the kitchen," she said to Frank. "You must be starved. Sit down and be a glutton."

Frank obeyed, and for a long while he made no attempt to understand what had happened. The events of the day were too overwhelming and now, with no need to do anything except sit here and eat and listen, he found himself almost in a state of shock. Jon's story this morning, the discovery of Lola's body, the police visit, Arthur's attack and subsequent confidence, Lola's unbelievable room and her letters from Walter Ames, and finally Bill Rapier's unburdening of his soul—they were simply too much. Frank's mind and emotions were saturated and were no longer capable of absorption.

Eileen arrived. Alice sat on the arm of Frank's chair and gave of her special tranquillity. Sergeant chattered shrilly and dominated the conversation, relentlessly forcing his ideas and personality on everybody in the room. What he chose to speak of, everybody discussed. What he was not interested in, nobody mentioned.

He finally came round to the murder. "What you ought to do, as a matter of self-defence," he said in his eager, piping voice, "is to decide who killed her and why, and then live normal, healthy lives based on that assumption. And there are only two people you can possibly pin it on without making yourselves miserable. Either me, or the Leather Man."

Kathy, in the middle of piling up another plate for Frank, swung round. "Why you, darling? How could we believe you'd ever hurt anybody?"

Sergeant's small blue eyes gleamed. "Any man will kill for love, and I love you. I want Red to marry you again so that you'll be my daughter-in-law. If he'd married Lola, I'd have had the wrong daughter-in-law. You see, I'm sharp, I'm direct, I'm logical. I know nobody will ever suspect me. You can't prove where I was Friday evening, can you? Where was I, for instance, when the whole gang

went up to pull Bill Rapier's car out of the ditch? Did I go along? Did you see me, Bill?"

"No," answered Bill. "Where were you?"

"I might have been committing my murder, for all you know. That was the time for it. Everybody running around in the dark and yelling blue murder, while I sneaked into the game-room. She'd never suspect me, of course. She'd think I was droll, until I struck. Then she'd scream once, a kind of doleful, plaintive cry, but—"

Eileen dropped her coffee-cup. "Stop it!" she shrieked. "Stop it! You don't have to go through the whole sickening business, do you?"

Sergeant's mouth dropped open and he rubbed his cheek. "I'm sorry," he said meekly.

Eileen grabbed her husband's hand and pressed it to her cheek. Rapier turned and faced the five other people in the room.

"You fools!" he said. "You don't know when to stop. Horsing around. Acting smart. Making a joke out of a tragedy. When none of you so much as saw where—"

"Bill's right," interrupted Frank suddenly. "Let's drop the fantasy and get down to facts. Bill was about to say he saw the thing happen. Weren't you, Bill?"

Bill's broad, blunt chin jutted forward. "Exactly."

"Bill was standing in the living-room and looking out of the window," continued Frank. "He saw Lola on the platform. He saw someone step on the balcony above and knock over the big stone flower-trough. Is that right, Bill?"

Rapier nodded. "Right."

"The only trouble," said Frank, smiling, "was that it was light inside and dark outside and Bill isn't quite sure who it was. In fact, he's not even certain about anything he saw that night. Are you, Bill?"

"On the contrary," said Rapier, "I'm sick of stooging, and here's the truth—if you can take it. I saw everything distinctly. You forget that the light was pouring out of the game-room and that the platform was lit up like a stage. I know who killed her because I saw."

Frank felt his smile stiffen into a foolish, empty grin. He'd thought he could ease Rapier out of his role of witness and make

him admit publicly that he was certain of nothing. But the scheme had backfired.

Now Frank leaned back and sipped his coffee. If Bill wanted to make an accusation, let him. Frank was done with fear. Uncertainty, he had learnt, was worse than fear. Far worse.

He glanced around the room, at the fixed stares, at Rapier's glaring defiance and waiting for the next question.

Sergeant asked it. "Well," he said, "if you have to be coaxed—who was it?"

"Frank!" clicked out Rapier in a dry, confident voice.

For a moment no one was certain whether or not Rapier was serious. Then, in the stunned silence, Alice jumped to her feet.

"But you couldn't!" she exclaimed angrily. "You couldn't look through the windows because I decorated them with flowers. Flowers plastered solidly across them. And they weren't moved, either. I know."

Bill Rapier smiled icily. Red moved ominously across the room. His fists were clenched and his voice boomed low and angrily.

"Bill," he said. "You son of a ——!"

His fist doubled up and his big shoulders hunched. Then Frank stopped him.

"Aren't you a little unfair?" he drawled. "The details of how he saw may be a little mixed up, but what of it? The important thing is that's he right. I was there."

Slowly, Red's fist unclenched. Sergeant remarked dryly: "Frank, you're a fool and I can prove it. As I said earlier in the evening, the man on the balcony had nothing to do with you. I saw him, too. It was the Leather Man."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE moment Frank opened his eyes the following morning he was fully awake and in his mind's eye he saw the confused and crowded scenes of the previous day. Jon looming in the bedroom doorway, the police marching to the cave with pickaxe and crowbar, Kathy charming the three waddling pigs, Arthur slashing out with a broken shard of glass, the incredible spectacle of Lola's bedroom, Bill Rapier's strange confession. And finally, the incident at Red's.

Frank chuckled over that tableau of surprise. Red, turned from anger to shocked amazement at Frank's statement and collapsing heavily in a chair. Muttering, "You—knocked over the flower-box?" And Bill Rapier grinning and announcing in a patronizing tone that he was going home.

Frank had followed him out to the corridor. "Bill," he'd said fiercely. "You know damn' well why I said that, don't you?"

Bill had blinked. "You mean—just to stop Red from taking a poke at me?"

"Exactly. And that's what I'm going to explain to the rest of them."

Bill had seemed to wilt. Then he'd smiled wearily and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, well. I suppose I ought to thank you. I was just guessing, of course, but I thought I'd hit something. And now I'm not sure whether I did or not. But I still have the business about the minister. You're a queer guy, Frank."

Back in the room, Frank had explained his announcement. Shortly afterwards, he and Alice and Kathy and Sergeant had walked home. As they had reached the road, Kathy had stumbled. If Sergeant hadn't caught her she'd have fallen.

"I'm just tired," she murmured. "So tired."

It had been the reaction, of course. All the afternoon and evening she'd played at being Red's wife again. Now the game was over and what was left of her had to go back to a solitary guest-room at the Danzigs'.

Frank and Alice had walked ahead, arm and arm in the darkness.

But the touch and fragrance of her had seemed to go through Frank. His fatigue dissolved and he felt a surging, irresistible strength, an eagerness and a lightness.

"You know I told the truth, don't you?" he said. "I was actually there, on the balcony."

"I knew you'd been in the room and that something had happened."

"It's hard to explain," Frank had said slowly. "A combination of sunstroke and some kind of emotional upheaval. I went in rather mixed up, and I came out completely free. Of Lola. You know all about that room, of course. Did you mind?"

Alice laughed. "I did, at the beginning. The very first week we were married I noticed that locked door and I snooped and found the key and went in. Naturally it was a shock, especially because of the way Lola was acting. As if she belonged here and I didn't. I felt like Bluebeard's wife peeking into the closet. It took me a day or two to get over it." She chuckled at the recollection. "Well, maybe a little longer, but the point is that I did get over it."

"I'm sorry," said Frank. "I didn't mean to bring you any unhappiness, ever."

"Maybe it was just as well. I'll never be too possessive a wife, because I'll always know that there may be another Lola's room in you, somewhere. You see, I had my crisis, too."

"The night you cleaned up?" asked Frank.

Alice nodded. "Yes. When I went in there and saw someone had been sick, I knew it was you. I got a *Daily News* that Father had left in his room, and I cleaned up thoroughly. That was why it took me so long to find out that Kathy had gone."

"You just about saved my life," said Frank.

Lying there and watching Alice's calm, delicate features, Frank thought of the flimsy structure of falsehood that stood between him and arrest. It would be so easy for the police to break it down and learn the truth. If they chanced to discover just one lie. If Bill Rapier talked. All they needed was an opening wedge.

Presently Frank rose, dressed hurriedly, went upstairs to the kitchen and put the coffee water on the stove. It was just beginning to boil when Sergeant, in a flaming bath-robe of orange and blue stripes, exploded through the dining-room door.

"Hello, Frank," he said shrilly. "What time is it? Where's Alice? I got up to get some of her coffee and where the hell is she? I praise her the length and breadth of the land. I haven't had a decent cup of coffee since you married the girl. Just drug-store swill and some maid's conception of what's good for your bowels when you get up in the morning. I don't need that stuff. I have wonderful bowels. Where's Alice and why doesn't she get up instead of insulting me with a substitute cook?"

"Listen, Dynamo," said Frank, grinning. "You've been drinking my coffee every day since you've been here. You drank it the morning Eddy and the chief were here and you loved it. You even bragged about it. But did I claim credit? Hell, no—I'm too modest."

"You're too damn' cheerful," said Sergeant. "I don't like it. It's bad for the nerves and it brings on ulcers of the stomach. It's forced and unnatural and uncivilized and—"

Frank rapped a spoon on the kitchen table. "One more complaint out of you and I won't even let you taste my coffee."

"Murder!" snapped the little gnome. "Mayhem, rape, blackmail and treason." Then he sat down and unfolded his napkin. "Nice day," he remarked affably.

Alice and Kathy arrived five minutes later, and Frank surrendered the kitchen. Presently the table began to pile up with food. Even Sergeant beamed and spoke quietly, without trying to show off.

It was into this idyllic harmony that Mathilda Sir pranced like an Amazon leading her cohorts to battle.

"Hello," she thundered. "I just took the men to the station. It's my week on the car pool. Have you seen the news?" And triumphantly she tossed her five New York papers on to the table.

Frank glanced casually at them. The tabloids were playing up the crime for all it was worth. He snorted and pushed them away. Mathilda looked disappointed, but she rallied quickly enough.

"The real reason I dropped in," she said, self-righteously, "wasn't to show you the scandal, but to ask about Eileen. She called up last night and I'm on my way over now. She said there'd been a fight at Red's. What happened?"

Frank looked at her, remembering how, when he'd brown-beaten her the other day, he had freely admitted to a lie. She was one of the weak spots in his position. But her eyes were frank,

friendly, loyal, and he knew he wouldn't have to worry about her.

"Bill claimed he'd seen something through a window of the living-room," he remarked, "but luckily Alice was able to take the ground from under him. So it didn't amount to anything, after all."

"Why not?" asked Mathilda.

"Alice told him the window was covered with flowers, and he had to admit he couldn't have seen a thing."

"Flowers?" repeated Mathilda. "There were no flowers on the window."

Alice laughed with quiet relish. "I knew that, but nobody else did."

Frank slapped his hand on the table. "What? You mean to say you put that over on all of us?"

"It wasn't difficult," said Alice. "Men never notice flowers. And Eileen was too upset last night to think."

Mathilda roared with laughter. "Dopes!" she roared. "Dopes—every one of you!"

After breakfast, Frank went down to his desk in a corner of the living-room and took out his typewriter. He addressed an envelope to the Board of Trustees of his school. Then he slipped a piece of paper in the machine. He left the date blank.

Gentlemen [he wrote]. Because of circumstances which, through no fault of mine, have publicly linked my name to a crime, I feel that my resignation as principal of the Carlson Academy is in order. In taking this step I am not following my own inclinations, for I believe my ability to perform my work is in no way affected, and that any argument to the contrary is idiotic. I prefer, however, not to precipitate a situation which might become disagreeable to some of you.

Sincerely yours,
Frank Danzig.

Frank re-read the letter, folded it and put it in an envelope without sealing it. There was still a chance that he might not have to send it, and he preferred to wait until the last minute.

After he had written the letter, he felt restless and he started

upstairs. Sergeant, sitting in the library, called out, "Where to, Frank?" And Frank answered: "I don't know. Come on up for a breath of air. What are you reading?"

"The encyclopaedia. I started it twenty years ago in a different edition and I'm only half through."

"Then you're obsolete already. Forget it, Sergeant. You know, this would be a hell of a good day to take my forms off the dam."

Sergeant drew back. "Don't expect me to help. Get Red. I hate manual labour. I hate exercise and all the useful arts. Get somebody else."

"Red's in town. I won't make you work too hard, Sergeant. Honest. All you have to do is stand at the bottom and pull an occasional nail."

"I never pulled a nail in my life."

"Then I'll teach you and you can skip the article on nail-pulling."

"Reading's more fun."

"Come on," said Frank. He led the way upstairs. The two wrecking-bars were on a hook in the garage and he swung them idly as he headed for the other side of the ravine. There, along the rim of the bowl that was to be the swimming pool, he handed the smaller bar to Sergeant.

"You go down to the bottom. All you do is yank the loose nails after I knock the plank free. Then I flip it, and you scamper."

"I thought it would be something like this," sighed Sergeant, and obediently climbed down the slope to the foot of the dam.

Frank peeled off his shirt and went to work. Forcing out spikes, prying loose the long pieces of lumber and banging them free, he felt better. He forgot about Sergeant. He answered the little gnome's questions with only half his mind. His main attention was concentrated on the play of his muscles, on the physical job at hand. Consequently, when Sergeant yelled, Frank answered casually.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, and didn't bother to turn round.

"Frank!" This time there was fright in Sergeant's voice. "Come down here, quick!"

Sergeant was standing about five feet from the dam, near an

exposed section of concrete. Frank, at the top, leaned over. "What's the matter now?"

Sergeant looked up anxiously. "Frank!" he said in a low, urgent voice. "Just come down here."

Genuinely worried, Frank gripped the wrecking-bar and scrambled down the slope. Sergeant hadn't moved. He was standing perfectly still, staring at the concrete and mechanically licking his lips.

"What the hell—" began Frank, and then he stopped short. "Good God!" he exclaimed.

His heart seemed to stop beating and a cold, sick feeling went through him. There was no name to his emotion. Just a stunned, helpless emptiness.

"They're—hands!" he said.

Sergeant nodded, and Frank kept staring. Embedded in the concrete, tips up, were the outstretched fingers of a pair of hands. The flesh on three of the fingers showed clearly, exposing the neat pattern of whorls. The other finger-tips were just shapes and bubbles in the concrete, where air spaces had formed.

They weren't human, those hands. They were too grimy, too coated with cement. They couldn't be human. But how . . .

Frank must have said it aloud, because Sergeant answered. "How? I've heard of things like that. The stuff acts like quicksand."

"But who?" demanded Frank. He knew, however. He knew at once. There was only one person it could possibly be. And yet he kept staring in a tense, unwilling fascination and telling himself he had no idea who it was.

"The poor so-and-so," he finally said. "It must have happened—" He bit his lips and didn't finish the sentence.

"The night of the wedding," said Sergeant. "Probably around dark. Any time later, the cement would begin to harden."

"Why didn't he yell?" asked Frank in sudden, unreasonable irritation. "He knew damn' well somebody'd come. A couple of hundred feet from the house. Didn't he have any sense at all?"

"Maybe he did yell," remarked Sergeant quietly. "There was a lot of noise in the house. And then the rush of water."

"We'd have heard him," said Frank. "We'd have to."

"Maybe he was drunk. Too drunk to know what he was doing. And so he fell in."

"Drunks don't go walking around aimlessly. Not here."

Frank stepped closer and wanted to scrape the concrete with his nails. He had to move, to do something, no matter what. But he didn't even raise his arms.

"Concrete," he said. "Lola was buried in concrete. And now"—he pointed—"now this."

"It's just a coincidence," said Sergeant. "Has to be."

Frank swallowed hard. "Let's get out of here and call the police."

"Come on," said Sergeant.

Neither of them moved.

"He was reaching up," said Frank. "Trying to reach the air."

"He was dead long before he sank this far."

"About how long would it take?" asked Frank in a queerly strained voice.

"How do I know? He'd suffocate as soon as his head went under."

"Sure. But before that?"

"Who knows?"

"Let's get out of here," said Frank for the second time.

This time they went.

At the top of the dam they both sat down.

"I'm going to love this pool," said Frank. "I'm going to get a hell of a lot of fun out of it. Every time I take a swim, I'm going to think of him. When I have grandchildren, they'll come out of the pool and say, 'Look, Grandpop, tell us the story of—'"

"Don't be morbid," interrupted Sergeant.

"I'm sorry. First we call the police. Then we'll tell Alice. Don't let her out here."

"When you're dead, you're dead," said Sergeant. "As a matter of fact, it was probably a nice, painless death."

"Sure. It always is, once you're dead. But when he felt he was going under and realized there was nothing he could do about it—"

"He probably never even knew it. He just sat down and sank. And thought how nice it was."

"That's why his hands are that way, huh?"

"Frank, pull yourself together."

Frank laughed sharply. "I'm okay. I just wish he'd picked another place to fall in."

"How could he? This was the only soft concrete in the neighbourhood."

"That's what's so terrible about it. Space—woods—everything. And he has to walk into that."

"Maybe he was pushed."

Frank stood up. "Don't talk nonsense. Come on back to the house and have a drink. You're as shaky as I am. The only difference is you cover up better."

"Maybe you're right, at that," said Sergeant.

In the corridor on the top floor Frank picked up the 'phone and called Chief Ferret. "Charlie? This is Frank Danzig. You'd better come out here and bring Eddy and a couple of pickaxes. Somebody else got entombed in concrete . . . Who? How? I don't know. All you can see are the hands, as if he sank in and—hell, come out and see for yourself." He hung up. "Morbid guy. Wants all the details. Ready for that drink?"

"Come on down," said Sergeant. "I don't usually indulge in the morning, but I think we both need one."

They drank hurriedly, without the gesture of a toast, and then Frank said: "Look, Sergeant. Let's not kid ourselves. You know damn' well who it is, don't you?"

Sergeant nodded. "Logically, there's only one person it can be, isn't there?"

"Yes," said Frank. "Walter Ames."

When the police arrived, Frank didn't go out. From a window he saw Chief Ferret and Eddy Christopher park their car on the roadside and cross the bridge over the ravine. Behind them marched a pair of state troopers. A few minutes later, the mortuary wagon joined the queue.

Alice and Kathy came in from the garden. Kathy was saying, "I think pigs are cute, in a way, especially when they're not eating."

"They're always eating," replied Alice. Then they entered the room.

"Hello," said Alice. "What are you looking so solemn about?"

Frank put his hands on Alice's shoulders and told her. Her dark eyes seemed to grow dead, but she said nothing. As for Kathy, she took the news with no show of emotion, as if the capacity for feeling had been reached long ago and nothing else could touch her.

About a half hour later Eddy crossed back over the ravine and headed for the house. Frank went upstairs to meet him.

"Hello, Eddy," he said.

"Hello, Frank. Chief wants to see you."

"Sure," said Frank.

Ferret and three troopers were standing at the foot of the dam. A big block of concrete had been knocked out and the exposed portion was dark and crumbly. It had no shape. It bore no relationship to the thing lying there on the ground.

The first thing Frank noticed was the army uniform. He studied it as if he'd never seen one before. Then, almost against his will, he let his glance move upward. Strictly speaking, there was no face. It was just a rough mask, without distinct features, and with concrete clinging to what was left of it.

"Know who it is?" asked Frank. In a way the question was foolish, for no one could identify that thing.

Ferret answered. "Can't tell for sure, of course, but"—he pointed to one of the hands—"he's wearing Walter Ames's ring. But what I wanted you for, Frank, was to introduce you to Sergeant Berman here. The sergeant's going to be working on the case from now on." Charlie Ferret gulped and rubbed his chin. "You didn't intend going to town, did you? Because the sergeant was just saying he wants you to stick around."

"Me?" said Frank in surprise. "What for? I'd have thought this would clear up your case. Doesn't it look as if Ames might have killed Lola and then fallen into the concrete?"

"That's what we thought at first," said Ferret. "And that's what we'd like to think. But we can't. Because Ames, or whoever this is, was hit over the head. He didn't just fall in. He was murdered."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

FRANK spent most of the day in the garden. He had a sandwich or two for lunch, and then he went out to the vegetable patch to work. The potato beetles were attacking in force. He pinched off a couple of them with his thumb and finger, and got to work with his spray material. When he was finished he noticed the beginning of a hole that the woodchucks had burrowed under the fence. He filled up the hole and stood there, staring at the earth.

He was practically under arrest. Why Charlie Ferret should be offhand about Lola, whom Frank had presumably had many reasons to remove, and then get tough about Ames, against whom Frank had nothing, was something he couldn't fathom. But it was a danger sign.

Frank picked up his garden tools and went back to the house. Alice called to him from the kitchen. "Frank, are you all right? You didn't get too much sun again, did you?"

He poked his head into the kitchen. "I'm made of sterner stuff, Monkey. One touch of sun doesn't make me an invalid."

"A reporter just called up."

"What did he expect? A play-by-play account of the murder? We only know what the police tell us."

He went downstairs to change his clothes, and as he took off his overalls something scratched against his leg. It was the brooch, of course. He'd forgotten all about it, and now he held it up and examined it. How does a guy get hold of a valuable brooch and not even realize it? There had to be some knowledge, something floating down there in his subconscious mind. Either that, or else somebody had planted it on him.

He went downstairs to the big living-room. Why had Ames been murdered? Red might have had a motive to kill him, but it was ridiculous to think of Red as a murderer. Rapier, however . . .

Frank stared at the dark, moving stream outside the window. Rapier had a motive. Suppose Rapier had killed Ames, and that Lola's murder had been a by-product. An accident or a necessary incident to the main crime. Then Rapier . . .

Frank stood up and walked into the game-room. How could he ever prove anything against Bill Rapier? Rapier, who had guessed Frank had been standing on the balcony and knocked over the flower-box. Who else but the murderer would know that?

Fine. But how was Frank going to prove it?

He stared at the painted bar. Alice had sketched a purple rooster and a pink fish along the front, and the poor fish was chasing the rooster and could never catch up.

The brooch. He walked out of the game-room and crossed the living-room to the far corner. Suppose Ames had been in there with Lola, as Jon believed. That would explain Lola's queer insistence on being alone. Ames had been with her and she didn't want anyone to know it. But someone had walked in, seen them and killed them. That much was logical. But—who?

Frank set up his typewriter and slid a piece of paper in the roller. Free association. To write whatever came into his head. About a brooch. His fingers began to move, aimlessly.

Brooch [he wrote]. Brooch, brooch, who's got the brooch? Frank wants to know. Then he stared at the keys, lit a cigarette and tried again.

Brooch. Lola brooch gone with the wind on a table land sailed upward to pin herself on a cloud where she picked up an angel and done him wrong in death ob beau dreams of a winding tale thy scarf is red as blood of the unwashed lamb broach not the subject to the lord for thy hands are unclean they drip with the pinpricked wounds of thy evil machinations thou safety nestled leavings of myopic wrath.

He read it over. It didn't make sense. He'd made one typographical error. *Safety* instead of *safely*.

He took the sheet out of the machine and studied what he'd just written. The only words he'd repeated were brooch and pin. Brooch meant pin, and so even the repetition told him nothing.

He glanced at the typographical error again. Your subconscious was supposed to give itself away in slips of the tongue and in typographical errors. Therefore safety meant something. Safety—brooch. Safety—pin.

In his mind's eye he saw a small gold safety-pin. The image flitted momentarily across his consciousness and vanished. Then he thought of Ames again. Frank knew he hadn't buried Lola. And he knew he hadn't killed Ames. Then it hit him.

If Ames had been murdered, it followed that Frank was innocent! The whole nightmarish structure he'd erected to explain Lola's death was beginning to topple.

With a growing excitement, he went back to the sheet of paper. Pick up a safety-pin. The words were there. *Picked up—pin—safety.* He began underlining other words. *Table, brooch, hands.* Then he stood up and walked back to the game-room. There had been a card-table set up at the far end, for Alice's three-leafed mirror. Frank had walked around aimlessly, only half aware of what he was doing, picking up objects and putting them down again.

Then he saw it in his mind, and he remembered. He'd kept roaming around, mechanically picking up objects and then putting them down again. The chessmen on a table in the corner. A liqueur glass. The swizzle stick. A pipe, a beer mug, a Chinese coin. A gold safety-pin. And then the brooch. But he hadn't put it back. He'd dropped it in his pocket and been completely unaware of his action.

Frank wanted to yell. His mind seemed to catch fire and he began going over the jumbled mass of incidents connected with the case. Alice cleaning the room upstairs and using a *Daily News* that Sergeant had brought into the house. Jon and the whisky bottle. Arthur roaming around the grounds and bumping into a figure dressed up as the Leather Man.

Someone else, later, wearing that same Leather Man costume. You can't work in concrete without getting it on your shoes and clothes. Someone must have borrowed the leather costume so that there would be no tell-tale evidence connecting him with the gruesome burial in the cave. And whoever it was had knocked out Stephen.

Rapier. What had he done? He'd come late and he'd offered Frank some whisky. His car had got stuck and he'd asked for help. He'd had a bit of dirt on his shoulder. From pushing the car? He'd opened the game-room doors and he'd looked for the body. Gleefully. He and Stephen. And they hadn't found it.

But suppose they had? That would explain why Stephen had returned later. For another look at the body.

No, that couldn't be. Frank went back to Rapier. He'd taken Red home and he'd deliberately tripped him. Why?

Suddenly it dawned on Frank. The realization that Alice had lied.

He didn't want to believe it, but it had to be. Alice, Rapier, Jon, Ames, Stephen. Of course. It all fitted in. It was so simple, and yet it was like a terrible pain within Frank. Someone you love and see every day. To watch and to know. To wait for the moment the police would catch on to the one small, weak, obvious clue. To realize that they'd never rest, that Charlie Ferret could get the information and turn it over to the state police and the clue would still be there. To wait, while the police machinery ground down the evidence and sifted it out, in laboratories, in visits, in interrogations and conferences, in typewritten reports and hastily scrawled notes, until finally someone saw it, the weak spot, the loop-hole, and the obvious crack. And then—arrest.

Frank walked over to his desk and picked up the envelope with the letter he'd written to the trustees this morning. He inserted today's date, signed his name and sealed the envelope. There was no way out, now.

Sergeant came clumping down the spiral staircase and called out: "Frank—there you are! I've been looking all over the place for you."

"What's wrong now?" asked Frank.

"Everything," snapped Sergeant. "Your wife. The police were here and she served them ice tea and chatted with them as if they'd come to pay a social call. She's too sure of herself, Frank. What's she hiding?"

Frank frowned. "I don't know. And I don't want to wonder about it. I think I'll just sit here and look at you, Sergeant. In a way, you're pretty."

Sergeant smiled happily, but Frank disregarded him. He felt tired and sapped of his strength. He was glad he didn't have to face the police for a while. He doubted whether he'd have been able to go through such an ordeal. His certainty was too sharp, his shock too great, his knowledge too recent. Later on he'd pull himself together, but now he wanted to rest.

He sat hunched deep in his chair, his legs stretched out, his forehead wrinkled and his mouth upcurved in the hint of a smile which he hadn't the energy to force the rest of the way. Sergeant, catching

the sombreness of Frank's mood, stood up, walked over to a table and picked up the encyclopaedia, volume fourteen.

"I collected a little information that might interest you," he said. "The police are going to crack down later, but not yet. They're waiting for the results of the autopsy. They have that skull wound to work on. They had it in Lola's case, too, but they muffed it. This time they won't."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"One of the troopers. It seems that the concrete embedded in the wound makes the analysis particularly difficult, but it's their best chance. They figure that, with patience, they'll find some foreign matter to indicate the weapon with which he was killed. When they do, they're going to town on it. Until then, they're holding their fire. So get ready for the blitz, Frank. It's going to fall on Damp House."

Frank grunted. The blitz had fallen already. A time-bomb squarely in the centre of Damp House. Sergeant didn't know, as yet, and there was no point in telling him any sooner than necessary.

Frank heard Alice's step and, as always, he snapped out of his apathy. She came down the spiral staircase, first her long, slim legs, then her yellow dress and finally her face, smiling, seeking him out and casting her spell upon him. She crossed the room, a dark lovely girl with the blackest eyes he had ever seen. Confident and sure of herself.

He wondered how long it would be before the police broke her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

At dinner, Alice was full of her social triumph over the police. "I didn't tell them a thing of any importance," she said. "I promised to bake cookies for them tomorrow and that's all they're really interested in."

"How about Eddy?" asked Sergeant.

Alice put her fork down. "Eddy? I didn't particularly notice anything."

"You should have," said Sergeant. "Always notice Eddy. The others don't count."

"Why do you always say that?" asked Kathy.

"Because he's like me," snapped Sergeant. "Nothing ever gets by him. He's quiet, melancholic and nobody's fool. Every man recognizes his own kind."

"What do you think will happen?" asked Kathy.

"I don't know," said Sergeant. "It all depends on the autopsy. I picked up some inside information to the effect that the police were concentrating on this house and on Arthur Blithe, but they wouldn't move until after they had the final laboratory reports."

"Then they're not going to bother Red?" asked Kathy.

Sergeant took a long time to answer. "No," he finally said. "They're not going to bother him."

He spoke queerly, as if his words had a double meaning. Frank studied his face for some further sign, but Sergeant, intent on his soup, kept his eyes averted.

Then Frank saw Jon standing outside the window and making Indian signs to attract his attention. Frank got up. "Princess is out there," he said, and headed for the door.

Jon was waiting outside. "Gosh, Frank, I'm glad I saw you. I'm in a hell of a mess."

"What's the trouble?"

"Police," said Jon. "They want to arrest me."

"What for?"

Jon's eyes clouded. "I don't know. I couldn't very well ask them. But there are two of them waiting at my house. Their car's parked in front of my road and one of them is sitting on the steps and the other one's inside."

"Why not go, then? Eventually you'll have to."

"I know, but I'm scared. Not of being arrested, but of saying the wrong thing. I'm afraid I'll talk, phrase things the wrong way and get other people in trouble. There's all that business of my having seen Walt Ames the afternoon it happened, and then not having said anything about it. They'll quiz me, and Walt told me a lot. He was drunk, you know."

"Whom are you afraid of getting into trouble, Jon?"

"Red," said Jon. "If I'm questioned, I'm bound to end up by giving him a motive. And I can't do that. I couldn't do that to anybody I know."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Frank.

Jon smiled. "It sounds a little silly, Frank, but I'd like you to hide me."

"How long could we do that? A day? Two days? The longer it takes them to find you, the tougher it'll be when they catch up."

"Yes. But still—"

"Listen," said Frank. "You haven't mentioned Ames's visit to the police, have you?"

"No."

"Who else besides me knows that Walt was at your house?"

Jon hesitated.

"Well, Bill Rapier brought him."

"What!" exclaimed Frank.

"Bill came home early and they met on the train. Bill dropped him off at my place."

"Did Bill see you?"

"No. He just left Walt at the mail-box."

"Then he doesn't know. You can say you were out in the woods with Picasso, and that if Walt was at your house, you never even saw him. That's your story. They can't break that, can they? Is there anything of Walt's at your place that the police could possibly find?"

"No. Nothing."

"Just one other thing. Rapier may say he left Ames at your house, but, as we said, he can't prove that Walt saw you. But if Rapier saw Walt afterwards, if Rapier can prove Walt did see you, then admit the whole business and ask the police to get in touch with me as soon as possible. Because, if Rapier saw Ames after dropping him off, so help me, I'm going to accuse him of murder and make it stick!" Frank took a deep breath. "I don't mean to sound so ominous, Jon, but I've been finding out things. You're going back now?"

"Yes."

"Well, good luck."

"Thanks, Frank. I'll need it."

They shook hands. Jon turned and took the short cut past the pig-pen. Frank went inside.

"What was the trouble with Princess?" grinned Sergeant. "You took so long."

"She had a knot in her shoelace and I couldn't get it untied," remarked Frank.

They were having dessert when a car came into the driveway and stopped outside. The four of them looked at each other, and they all had the same thought. The police. The autopsy had been completed and the police were here.

But the knock on the door was far too timid for Sergeant Berman. Frank called "Come in," and the door opened softly. Eddy Christopher entered, sad and apologetic as always.

"Hello, Eddy," said Frank. "Sit down and have some dessert with us."

"No," said Eddy. "Thanks."

"What's the matter? Not hungry?"

"I'm hungry all right," said Eddy, "but with what I come to say, I haven't the right."

"Nonsense," said Frank. "Bring him some dessert, Alice."

Eddy shook his head sadly. "No," he said.

"Go ahead and talk," said Sergeant irritably. "That's what you came for, isn't it?"

Eddy focussed his eyes on the tablecloth. "It's like this," he began

in his mild, nasal tone. "I've been doing a little investigating on my own. Remember, Frank, how you said the first day that you didn't know where the stream went and that you'd never been in the cave? Well, I happened to speak to little Tommy Boyd, and he told me about the time he was down here last summer and you sailed his boat with him and it went down the stream and disappeared underground. He cried some, and you said maybe you could get it back and did he like cave-hunting. Then you took him inside the Leather Man cave and sure enough, the two of you found the boat and fished it up."

"I remember now," said Frank lamely. "I'd forgotten all about it."

"If a body floated," said Eddy, "the same thing might happen." He looked up sadly, as if he were afraid someone might contradict him. Nobody did.

"Then there's the flower-box," he continued. "You said it had fallen a couple of days before the wedding, but Mrs. Sir saw it the same afternoon. She told me so, on the 'phone. Later on she called up to say she hadn't seen it, but that was just to cover up. Then there was the milkman. He gets a view of the balcony just where he slows up, and he says the box was there in the morning. Of course, he might have been mistaken, so I went over to the settlement camp and spoke to the girls that had helped out here. Two of them remembered the box was there on the balcony right up to five o'clock. Had zinnias in it. That nice gold kind."

"Eddy," said Frank, "you can still have that dessert. How about it?"

"I'm just leading up," said Eddy. "There's the cave and the flower-box, and there's the mason, Tony, who told how you brought the cement bags up to the cave, so they'd be handy.

"Of course, I had to prove how Lola's body got buried in the cave. Whoever did that would have to throw away his clothes, but I looked all through your garbage and there wasn't nothing. And you didn't use the incinerator the next day, either. So I borrowed the Leather Man suit, without telling you. It had been washed off, but not too well. I showed the samples I got from it along with some samples of the concrete chipped from the grave. and all the experts

say they were from the same job." Eddy was humble with chagrin.
"I don't have to say you had a motive, do I?"

"Practically everybody admits that," remarked Frank. "Everybody except Alice and myself. Anything else?"

"Well, there's the room with the balcony. The way I look at it, if I could prove you were there, I'd have a mighty strong case. Mr. Penscott says he locked you in your room, but Charlie never thought to look whether there was a key. The only key I noticed in the whole house was the one that fitted the room with the balcony. And that room hadn't been used for months."

"What of it?" asked Frank.

"Beatrice, who cleans for you, says it isn't used and she hasn't ever cleaned it as she can remember, and that's what bothers me," concluded Eddy. "I couldn't find any cobwebs."

"How does that prove who was in there?" demanded Frank.

"It don't prove who," admitted Eddy. "All I'm saying is the room was so spickand span that I knew somebody'd just cleaned and scrubbed it up. You can't keep cobwebs out in the summer-time, no matter how much you try. Not even Mrs. Christopher can do that, and she's the best housekeeper in all Shadow Hill."

"Eddy," said Alice. "I can explain—"

But Frank cut her off. "Please, Alice. Let me handle this." He turned to Eddy. "You're right," he said. "There's no point in denying it. You have too much evidence. But there's only one thing wrong with your case, Eddy. I didn't do it. Do you believe that?"

Eddy's sad, lugubrious eyes fastened on Frank. The cop took a long time to answer. Finally he nodded. "Yes, I believe you. But what can I do about it? I have to turn my evidence over to the chief, don't I?"

It was Frank's turn to nod. "Yes, I suppose so. But give me time, Eddy. The police are investigating other angles. Suppose you give me till tomorrow noon, huh?"

Eddy sighed. "That's all right with me. When I come over this evening, I was hoping I wouldn't have to make an arrest. Fact is, I never arrested anybody in my life. I'm not that kind of a cop I guess.

"Besides, if I arrested you and broke this case, Mrs. Christopher would start figuring how I could get a better job and make a pile of

money. She'd keep pushing me around and we wouldn't be happy no more. This way I can fool around with my carpentry, and Mrs. Christopher's happy because she's kind of resigned to my never amounting to much."

Frank grinned despite himself. "Have some dessert?" he asked.

Eddy shook his head and stood up. "Thanks, but blueberries—they never do set right on my stomach." And awkwardly, with embarrassment, he said good night and left.

Sergeant pushed back his chair. "See?" he said. "Now what?"

Frank got up and went outside.

He sat down in a deck-chair and lit a cigarette. The light had begun to fade and the colours had a queer, rich fullness. The blue of the sky was deep. From Red's house, at the top of the hill, you could probably see the last streaks of pink bathing the tops of the hills and tinting the luminescent band of water. Here there was just the green of the trees. Green, and the particular sort of peace that you find in valleys.

Frank thought of that tragic hour or two which he'd spent in Lola's study. Walter Ames had been with Lola in the game-room below. They'd sat there drinking Jon's whisky. They'd probably laughed at the thought of what they were doing. Kathy had knocked on the door a couple of times. Alice had come in with a cup of tea and sat and talked for a few minutes. Alice had mentioned Lola's posturing, as if it were an act for an unseen audience.

It had been an act, of course. For Ames. He must have been hidden in the lavatory. Then Lola had stepped out to the platform and Frank, standing above, had knocked over a section of the railing. That should have warned them, but it hadn't. She'd stayed there. Perhaps Ames had been with her, too. He must have been just out of Frank's line of vision. Ames had still been alive, of course, else Lola would not have stayed there so quietly.

And then Frank had knocked over the flower-box. Ames must have been struck within a few moments of that, just before or just after, and it had been Ames whom Frank had seen scuttling up the bank of the ravine. Ames had been both drunk and badly hurt. That was why he'd stumbled into the ooze of concrete. He

might even have heard the Wedding March as he sank to his death.

It was all clear now. The how and the who and the why. Everything save what Frank was going to do about it.

He leaned back, his brows puckered, his mouth strained and his nostrils flared and his blue eyes dark and murky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FRANK didn't hear Alice come until she knelt down next to him and spoke his name. "Frank!" she said. "Frank!" And then she dropped her head in his lap and burst into deep, uncontrollable sobs.

He stroked her hair softly, saying her name over and over again and feeling sorry that she had to undergo this. She who had been so clever in protecting him and so proud of fooling the police. But she had to admit defeat now. There was nothing to do but face it.

When she had stopped crying he said: "Alice, you know, too, don't you? You must know, because you lied to conceal it."

She rubbed her head against his knee in a sort of agony. "Yes," she said. "I had to. But how did you find out?"

"It was really quite simple," he said. "Red was supposedly out on his feet when he went home. Bill Rapier tripped him up, and Red knew it. Therefore he wasn't drunk. I should have realized that Red couldn't drink a tumbler of Scotch and hold it in his stomach. He must have got sick within a few minutes and lost it all. He was perfectly sober the whole evening. He merely played drunk. Later on he came back to the house, borrowed the Leather Man costume and buried her. I doubt whether anyone else around here would have had the physical strength to do it. He had to haul the sand and cement into the cave. I saw him handle cement bags earlier in the evening. He tossed them around the way most people would heave a five-pound bag of sugar."

"Frank, I'm going to tell. Otherwise they'll arrest you tomorrow. Eddy practically promised it."

"No, Monkey. I couldn't turn Red in. I'll take my chances on a trial. I'll figure a way out of it."

Alice sat up. "I won't let you! I'll call the police right now and tell them."

"No, darling."

"I tell you, I will! You can't stop me, Frank! I won't let them arrest you! I won't—I tell you, I won't!"

He grabbed her arm. "Alice," he said sharply. "Please!"

She calmed down at once. "But I mean it, Frank. I won't let you sacrifice yourself. I don't think Red will let you, either. Frank, let's go up there now. If you don't, I'm going to call the police."

Frank shrugged. He didn't relish the role of being a martyr. He loved Alice far too much.

Red came to his door, grinning. Alice threw her arms around him. "Red," she cried, "Eddy Christopher accused Frank and Frank is going to be arrested tomorrow. Frank knows you did it. He knows I made up that alibi about being with you in the library."

Red smiled. "There's nobody for whom I'd rather go to jail," he said. "If jail it must be."

Frank put his hand on Red's shoulder and tried to speak, but his throat was choked and the tears were welling up in his eyes. Red tapped him playfully on the shoulder. "Excuse me a moment, will you? Just wait for me in the living-room. I have something I'd like to get."

Alice and Frank sat down on the couch and held hands. "We're a hell of a cheerless couple," said Frank. "And we're supposed to be in love. Smile for me, huh?"

Alice forced a smile. "I am in love. Always. For ever. With you."

Then Red came back with a champagne bottle and three glasses. "Last free moments of a condemned man," he said. "With my sister and my best friend." He popped the cork and filled the three glasses. "I bought it for Lola," he said, "but that was a mistake, of course. Let's drink to the fun we might have had, if—"

They stood up and clinked glasses. Red, big and warm and honest, Alice, wan, with tears in her eyes, trying to smile and not quite making it, and Frank, filled with an aching love for these two people. They drank, and then solemnly they tossed their empty glasses and smashed them in the fireplace.

"Sentimental bunch, aren't we?" said Red. "I suppose I ought to tell you how it happened, and then we can sit out on the porch and watch the moon rise and talk the night through."

Neither Alice nor Frank answered. Red went on blithely. "I went down to the game-room and saw the pair of them there, kissing. Lola and Walt. I lost my head, that's all. I picked up the heavy boot and whacked Ames with it. He staggered and pulled Lola down with him. She lost her balance and went in. He was out on his feet, but he managed to scuttle out of sight, in the direction of the ravine. Then the flower-box dropped and I beat it back to the library.

"Later in the evening, when I went upstairs to 'phone, I sneaked outside. I could see Lola's body in the water, caught in some rocks. I hauled it out of sight and came back as soon as I could. I had my drink, but it only stayed in my stomach a couple of minutes before I threw up. Nobody realized, so I played drunk.

"Around two in the morning I came back. I knew the sand and cement were up near the cave and I figured that was the best place to bury the body. My chief problem was how to do it without having cement-stained clothes in my house that I couldn't account for. That was why I borrowed the Leather Man outfit, boots and all. I washed it off later, but in the dark I apparently didn't do a thorough job.

"I had one close call. Just as I was stepping out of your house all dolled up in leather, Stephen came prowling. I had to clip him one before he could recognize me. I hated to do it, but I couldn't take chances. Anything else? Or can we go outside and enjoy ourselves?"

"Look," said Frank. "I don't accept it. After the trick Lola pulled on you, you had a right to get sore. There's got to be a way out. I'll figure something."

"Don't be so desperate," said Red. "I can take what's coming to me."

"I mean it, Red. I'm going to call Sergeant and we'll have a brain-trust session. There's got to be a way out." He walked over to the 'phone and dialled his own number. There was no answer. "That's funny," he said.

"Forget it, Frank."

"I'm going down to get Sergeant," said Frank.

Red and Alice called to him, but Frank paid no attention. He marched out of the house and started down the hill. On the way

some inner urgency went to work on his mind and he began running. He saw the lights of his house and wondered again why no one had answered the 'phone.

As he sprinted into the driveway the door opened and he saw Kathy's silhouette outlined against the hall light. He called her name and she stopped short, slinking back into the house and pressing her body against the door. He was still running when he reached her.

She looked up at him, but she didn't speak. Her light, colourless eyes were empty and sulky.

"Where's Sergeant?" he asked.

She began laughing, but she didn't answer. He shook her again and repeated the question, and this time she pointed vaguely towards the stairs.

Frank lifted her up. She was limp as a rag and her eyes peered in unblinking incomprehension. Frank yelled at the top of his lungs. "Sergeant!" The only answer was the rumbling echo of his own voice. Kathy tittered hysterically.

Then Frank got frightened. He grabbed her and lifted her in his arms and strode down the stairs, yelling Sergeant's name and pausing for a few moments to listen for the reply that didn't come.

In the living-room he saw the open door that led to the lower end of the stream. He threw Kathy into a chair and ran out to the steps and bellowed wildly. "Sergeant!"

Through the pounding, rushing sound of the water, Frank heard the answer faintly. He snapped on his light and played it downstream, and then he saw Sergeant, near the bank, clinging to a rock and struggling feebly to keep his head above water. Frank uttered a hoarse cry and went after him.

The cut on Sergeant's head was bleeding, but it was not deep. Frank hauled him from the water and lifted him in his arms.

"Sergeant," he said. "Are you all right?"

The little gnome nodded weakly. "Lost my balance. She didn't hit me hard. I lost my balance, and I never was much of a swimmer."

Frank re-entered the living-room and put him down on a couch.

Kathy was still sitting in the chair where Frank had left her. She seemed to have no will and no energy left, and Frank turned his back to her.

"You knew it was she, didn't you?" he said to Sergeant. "You knew it and you accused her of it after we left, and she tried to kill you."

Sergeant nodded. "In a general way, yes. You see, she had the best motive, and she acted so queerly, besides. Leaving the house the night of the murder. Her tension the next evening when we had the storm. Her unconcern when Ames's body was discovered. And I never could swallow her story that she hadn't seen Lola just before the wedding. That was a little too much." He shook his head wearily. "Where are the others?"

"Up at Red's," answered Frank. "I'd better call them."

Kathy didn't speak until she saw Red. Then she smiled guiltily and seemed to come alive.

"Red," she said. "You see it's all wrong, don't you? When Sergeant accused me, I got scared. I thought of prison and the electric chair and I lost my head. I couldn't help it. I don't even remember what I did. I suppose it was something bad. But it's all right again, now that you're here. I feel all right now."

Red knelt down next to her. "I'd better tell them," she said in a high, toneless voice. "What they don't know is how I hated Lola. I'd been a door-mat for so long, I couldn't stand it any more. I couldn't stand watching you get married to Lola. I'd rather have died. I just couldn't."

"Yes," said Red. "Yes. It's going to be all right soon." He turned away and bit his lips.

"I went into the library," she said in a sing-song voice, "and I saw them outside on the platform. Lola and Walter Ames. They were both drunk, and she was saying she loved him but she was going to marry Red. And then divorce Red after the war, as soon as Walter was discharged.

"They didn't see me. I knew then I was going to kill her. I hated her so much. And what she was planning to do to you—I had to stop that. All that bothered me was how to get close enough

without being seen. I had the boot in my hand and I was wondering how I'd manage.

"Then the cat meowed and they both turned and looked up. I stepped forward and swung with all my might. I hit Ames and he fell down and dragged her with him, and then there was a noise and the whole balcony seemed to collapse. I thought the house was falling down, but it was only the flower-box. It just missed me. Ames turned and ran and Lola floated away, down the stream.

"I stood there and watched, and I didn't know what to do. Then you came in, Red. I told you what had happened and you said you'd take care of me. You closed the door and then you said it was all a mistake about Lola and that you'd take care of me. You told me to pull myself together. I did, didn't I?"

Red stroked her gently. "Yes, Kathy."

"I was so upset, I couldn't even stay in the house that night. There were times when I thought I'd lose my mind. Then I'd think of you, how you'd said you'd take the blame and protect me. But I don't want you to, Red. I love you too much. I won't even say you knew about it. Now it's my turn to protect you. Red, yesterday was so wonderful."

Quietly she closed her eyes.

They looked at each other, Sergeant and Alice and Frank and Red. None of them spoke, but they all knew they were thinking the same thing. That it was out of their hands. Kathy would confess. At the moment she was in a state of mental collapse, and it would be wise to call the police now, while she was so obviously in no condition to be questioned. It would form a basis for a plea of insanity.

She would never implicate Red. That much the four of them knew. The police would suspect Red, but they could prove nothing. Red and Frank were both safe.

To be sure, the police would want to know how Lola's body had been buried. They had known she had been drowned and that the drowning might have been an accident, and that was why they hadn't put on the pressure these last few days. But now they'd want to find out how her body had reached the cave and been encased in concrete.

Eddy knew that someone in the costume of the Leather Man had done it, but he could never prove who. With luck, that was all the police would ever have. A new Leather Man legend. The Leather Man come back to life and burying Lola's body in his cave.

Soberly, Frank went upstairs to 'phone.

THE END

